BY THE AUTHOR OF "LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET" &c

GERARD

OR THE WORLD THE FLESH AND THE DEVIL

LONDON: SIMPKIN & Co, LIMITED

At all Booksellers and Bookstalls, price 2s. 6d. *each, Cloth Gilt.*

THE AUTHOR'S AUTOGRAPH EDITION OF MISS BRADDON'S NOVELS.

Also ready, price 2s. each, Picture Boards.

1. LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET.
2. HENRY DUNBAR.
3. ELEANOR'S VICTORY.
4. AURORA FLOYD.
5. JOHN MARCHMONT'S LEGACY.
6. THE DOCTOR'S WIFE.
7. ONLY A CLOD.
8. SIR JASPER'S TENANT.
9. TRAIL OF THE SERPENT.
10. LADY'S MILE.
11. LADY LISLE.
12. CAPTAIN OF THE VULTURE.
13. BIRDS OF PREY.
14. CHARLOTTE'S INHERITANCE.
15. RUPERT GODWIN.
16. RUN TO EARTH.
17. DEAD SEA FRUIT.
18. RALPH THE BAILIFF.
19. FENTON'S QUEST.
20. LOVELS OF ARDEN.
21. ROBERT AINSLEIGH.
22. TO THE BITTER END.
23. MILLY DARRELL.
24. STRANGERS AND PILGRIMS.
25. LUCIUS DAVOREN.
26. TAKEN AT THE FLOOD.
27. LOST FOR LOVE.
28. A STRANGE WORLD.
29. HOSTAGES TO FORTUNE.
30. DEAD MEN'S SHOES.
31. JOSHUA HAGGARD.
32. WEAVERS AND WEFT.
33. AN OPEN VERDICT.
34. VIXEN.
35. THE CLOVEN FOOT.
36. THE STORY OF BARBARA.
37. JUST AS I AM.
38. ASPHODEL.
39. MOUNT ROYAL.
40. THE GOLDEN CALF.
41. PHANTOM FORTUNE.
42. FLOWER AND WEED.
43. ISHMAEL.
44. WYLLARD'S WEIRD.
45. UNDER THE RED FLAG.
46. ONE THING NEEDFUL.
47. MOHAWKS.
48. LIKE AND UNLIKE.
49. THE FATAL THREE.
50. THE DAY WILL COME.
51. ONE LIFE ONE LOVE.
52. GERARD; or, The World, The Flesh, and The Devil.
53. THE VENETIANS.

"No one can be dull who has a novel by Miss Braddon in hand. The most tiresome journey is beguiled, and the most wearisome illness is brightened by any one of her books."

LONDON: SIMPKIN & CO., LIMITED

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2025

https://archive.org/details/gerardorworldfle00brad_5

GERARD

OR

THE WORLD, THE FLESH, AND THE DEVIL

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET," "VIXEN," "ISHMAEL,"
"THE DAY WILL COME"
ETC.

Stereotyped Edition

LONDON
SIMPKIN, MARSHALL, HAMILTON, KENT & CO.
LIMITED
STATIONERS' HALL COURT
1892

[*All rights reserved*]

MISS BRADDON'S NOVELS.

Now Ready at all Booksellers' and Bookstalls,
Price 2*s.* 6*d.* each, Cloth gilt.

THE AUTHOR'S AUTOGRAPH EDITION OF MISS BRADDON'S NOVELS.

"No one can be dull who has a novel by Miss Braddon in hand. The most tiresome journey is beguiled, and the most wearisome illness is brightened, by any one of her books."

"Miss Braddon is the Queen of the circulating libraries."
The World.

LONDON:
SIMPKIN & CO., Limited,
Stationers' Hall Court.
And at all Railway Bookstalls, Booksellers', and Libraries.

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER PAGE

I. "I look down to his Feet, but that's a Fable" 1

II. "Oh, Pitiful Young Man, struck Blind with Beauty" 12

III. "Through a Glass darkly" 16

IV. "We are such Stuff as Dreams are made of" 30

V. Life upon New Lines 45

VI. The Face in the Vision 61

VII. "It is an Oath," she said 68

VIII. A Shadow across the Path 77

IX. "I built my Soul a Lordly Pleasure-House" 90

X. "Still One must lead some Life beyond" ... 105

XI. "Earth being so Good, would Heaven seem Best?" 116

XII. "For such Things must begin some Day" ... 120

XIII. "Out went my Heart's New Fire, and left it Cold" 134

XIV. "For Some must stand, and Some must fall or flee" 149

XV. "A Man can have but One Life and One Death" 164

XVI. "He is the very Soul of Bounty" ... 177

XVII. "So, Quiet as Despair, I turned from him" ... 182

XVIII. "Lost, lost! One Moment knelled the Woe of Years" 190

XIX. All along the River 196

XX. "Some Dim Derision of Mysterious Laughter" 211

XXI. "As Gentle and as Jocund as a Jest" ... 221

XXII. "Compare Dead Happiness with Living Woe" ... 226

XXIII. "Alas, why cam'st thou hither?"... ... 239

CHAPTER PAGE

XXIV. "ALAS, FOR ME, THEN, MY GOOD DAYS ARE DONE" 247

XXV. "HOW COULD IT END IN ANY OTHER WAY?" ... 253

XXVI. "SING WHILE HE MAY, MAN HATH NO LONG DELIGHT" 269

XXVII. "SOME LITTLE SOUND OF UNREGARDED TEARS" 283

XXVIII. "COULD TWO DAYS LIVE AGAIN OF THAT DEAD YEAR" 297

XXIX. "AND ALL SHALL PASSE, AND THUS TAKE I MY LEAVE" 304

XXX. "FROM THE WARM WILD KISS TO THE COLD" 313

XXXI. "THE LOVE THAT CAUGHT STRANGE LIGHT FROM DEATH'S OWN EYES" 328

EPILOGUE 344

GERARD;

OR,

THE WORLD, THE FLESH, AND THE DEVIL.

CHAPTER I.

"I LOOK DOWN TO HIS FEET, BUT THAT'S A FABLE."

THERE were low brooding clouds and a feeling of thunder in the air as Gerard Hillersdon's cab rattled along the King's Road, past squalid slums and shabby gentilities, towards quiet rural Parson's Green. Only a few years ago Parson's Green had still some pretension to rusticity. Where now the speculating builders' streets and terraces stretch right and left in hollow squares and close battalions, there were fine old Georgian and pre-Georgian mansions, and stately sweeps of lawn and shrubbery, and avenues of old-world growth, shutting out the hum and hubbub of the great city.

To one of those respectable old mansions, that one which was second only to Peterborough House in the extent and dignity of its surroundings, Gerard Hillersdon was driving under the heavy sky of a July afternoon, the lowering close of a sunless and oppressive day. Never, not even in mid-winter, had the smoke-curtain hung lower over London than it hung to-day, and if the idea of fog seemed impossible in July there at least prevailed that mysterious condition of the atmosphere, commonly known as "blight," a thick yellow haze, unpierced by a single sun-ray.

To Gerard Hillersdon, ordinarily the most sensitive of men, the atmosphere on this particular afternoon made no difference. He had got beyond that point in which atmosphere can raise a man's spirits or depress them. He had made up his mind upon the great question of life or death; and this kind of day seemed as good to him as any other, since he meant it to be his last day upon earth. He had made up his mind that life and he must part company; that for him at least life was not worth living: thus the grey and yellow of the atmosphere, and the threatening thunder-clouds to windward suited his temper far better than the blue sky and west wind which Lady Fridoline would have desired for her garden-party.

Incongruous as the thing may seem the young man was going to spend his last earthly afternoon at Lady Fridoline's garden-party; but for a man utterly without religious feeling or hope in the Hereafter such a finish to existence seemed as good as any other. He could not devote his last hours in preparing for the world that was to come after death, as he had no belief in any such world. To him the deed that was to be done before midnight meant swift, sudden extinction, the end of all things for him, Gerard Hillersdon. The curtain which was to fall upon the tragedy of his life to-night would rise upon no afterpiece. The only question which he had taken into serious consideration was the mode and manner of his death. He had made up his mind about that. His revolver was lying in its case in his lodging-house bedroom, under the shadow of St. James's Church, ready loaded—a six-shooter. He had made no will, for he had nothing to leave behind him, except a heavy burden of debt. He had not yet made up his mind whether to write an explanatory letter to the father he had sorely tried, and a brief farewell to the mother who fondly loved him, and whom he loved almost as fondly; or whether it were not better to leave only silence.

Not in sheer frivolity was he rattling along the road to Parson's Green. He had a stronger motive in going to Fridoline House than the desire to get rid of his last afternoon in the bustle and excitement of a herd of idle people. There would be some one there most likely whom he ardently desired to meet, were it but to touch her hand and say good night—good night for ever—as she stepped into her carriage, or were it but for one little smile across the crowd

She had told him only the night before, sitting out a waltz in the tropical heat of a staircase in Grosvenor Square, that she meant to be at Lady Fridoline's *omnium gatherum.*

"One meets such queer people," she said, with the regulation insolence, "I would not miss Lady Fridoline's Zoological Varieties for worlds."

A feather blown across her pathway might be enough to divert her fancy into another channel. He knew her well enough to know that there was no such thing as certainty where she was concerned; but on the off chance he went to Parson's Green, and his eye ran eagerly along the double line of carriages, looking for Mrs. Champion's liveries.

Yes, it was there, the barouche with its sober colouring, and the men in their dark brown coats, black velvet breeches, and silk stockings, and the fine upstanding Cleveland bays, strong enough to pull a Carter-Patterson van, yet with enough breeding for beauty. Wealth expressed itself here in that chastened form which education has imposed even upon the cit. The money that had bought that perfect equipage had all been made amidst the steam and din of the Stock Exchange, but the carriage and its appointments were every whit as perfect as those of her Grace of Uplandshire, which stood next in the rank.

She was there—the woman he wanted to see and speak with on this his last day.

"I am coming, my love, my sweet," he muttered to himself, as he wrote his name in the big book in the hall, the record by which Lady Fridoline was able to find out how many strangers and outsiders had been imposed upon her hospitality in the shape of friends' friends.

The crowd was tremendous; the house and grounds buzzed with voices, through which from the bosquet yonder cut the sharp twanging notes of a Tyrolese Volkslied, accompanied on the Streichzither; while from an inner drawing-room sounded the long-drawn chords of a violin attacking a sonata by De Beriot. On the left of the great square hall was the dining-room filled with a gormandising crowd; and on the lawn outside there was a subsidiary buffet under a pollarded Spanish chestnut which spread its rugged venerable limbs over a wide circle of turf, and made a low-roofed tent of leaves that fluttered and shivered in the sultry atmosphere.

Every class was represented at Lady Fridoline's garden-party; or rather it might be said that everybody in London whom any one could care to see was to be found on her ladyship's lawn or was to be hunted for in her ladyship's extensive shrubberies. Literature and the Stage were not more conspicuous than Church and Bar—Church represented by its most famous preachers, Bar by its most notorious advocates, to say nothing of a strong contingent of popular curates and clever stuff gowns.

Every noteworthy arrival from the great world of English-speaking people across the Atlantic was to be seen at Lady Fridoline's, from the scholar and enthusiast who had written seven octavo volumes to prove that Don Juan was the joint work of Byron's valet, Fletcher, and the Countess Guiccioli, to the miniature soubrette, the idol of New York, who had come to be seen and to conquer upon the boards of a London theatre. Everybody was there, for the afternoon was late, and the throng was thickest just at this hour.

Gerard Hillersdon went about from group to group, everywhere received with cordiality and *empressement*, but lingering nowhere —not even when the tiny soubrette told him she was just dying for another ice, and she reckoned he'd take her to the tree over there to get one—always in quest of that one somebody who made it worth his while to run the gauntlet of everybody. One of his oldest friends seized upon him, a man with whom he had been at Oxford seven years before, with whom he had maintained the friendship begun in those days, and who was not to be put off with the passing hand-shake which served for other people.

"I want a talk with you, Hillersdon. Why didn't you look me up last Tuesday? We were to have dined and done a theatre. Don't apologise; I see you forgot all about it. By Jove, old fellow, you are looking dreadfully washed out. What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Nothing beyond the usual mill-round. A succession of late parties may have impaired the freshness of my complexion."

"Come up the river with me. Let me see, to-morrow will be Saturday. We can go to Oxford by the afternoon express, spend a couple of nights at the Mitre, look up the dons whom we knew as undergrads, and row down to Windsor by Tuesday night."

"I should adore it; but it's impossible. I have an engagement which will keep me in London. I shall see you again presently."

He slipped out of the little group in which his friend figured. He had made the circuit of the lawn, looking right and left for that tall and graceful form which his eye would have recognised even afar off; and now he plunged into the shrubberied labyrinth which lay between the fine, broad lawn and the high walls which secluded Lady Fridoline's domain from the vulgar world.

He passed a good many couples sauntering slowly in the leafy shade, and talking in those subdued accents which seem to mean very much, and generally mean very little. At last, in the distance, he saw the form and face he was seeking—a tall, dark woman, with proudly poised head and splendid eyes, who walked with leisurely step, and tossed her parasol to and fro with a movement eminently expressive of *ennui*.

She was walking with a young man who was supposed to be a fast ascending star in the heaven of literature—a young man who was something of a journalist, and something of a poet, who wrote short stories in the magazines, was believed to contribute to *Punch*, and was said to have written a three-volume novel. But however brilliantly this young gentleman may have been talking, Edith Champion had evidently had enough of him, for at sight of Hillersdon her face lighted up, and she held out her hand in eager welcome.

They clasped hands, and he turned back and walked on her right in silence, while the journalist prattled on her left. Presently they met another trio of a mother and daughters, and the journalist was absorbed and swept along by this female brood, leaving Mrs. Champion and Hillersdon *tête-à-tête*.

"I thought you were not coming," she said.

"Did you doubt I should be here after you had told me I should see you? I want to see as much of you as possible to-day."

"Why to-day more than all other days?"

"Because it is my last day in town."

"What, you are leaving so soon? Before Goodwood?"

"I don't care two straws for Goodwood."

"Nor do I. But why bury one's self in the country or at some German bath too early in the year? Autumn is always long enough. One need not anticipate it. Is your doctor sending you away? Are you going for your cure?"

"Yes, I am going for my cure."

"Where?"

"Immerschlafenbad," he answered, inventing a name on the instant.

"I never heard of the place. One of those new springs which doctors are always developing, no doubt. Every fashionable physician has his particular fad in the way of a watering-place. And you are really going to-morrow?"

"To-morrow I shall be gone."

"How shall I live without you?" she sighed, with the prettiest skin-deep sentiment, which wounded him almost more than her disdain could have done. "At least I must have all your society till you are gone. You must dine with me and share my opera-box. 'Don Giovanni' is an opera of which one can never have too much, and a new soprano is to be the Zerlina, a South American girl of whom great things are expected."

"Is Mr. Champion at home?"

"No, he is in Antwerp. There is something important going on there—something to do with railways. You know how he rushes about. I shall have no one but my cousin, Mrs. Gresham, whom you know of old, the Suffolk vicar's lively wife. We shall be almost *tête-à-tête*. I shall expect you at eight o'clock."

"I will be punctual. What a threatening day!" he said, looking up at the gathering darkness which gave a wintry air to the summer foliage. "There must be a storm coming."

"Evidently. I think I had better go home. Will you take me to my carriage?"

"Let me get you some tea before you go."

They strolled across the grass to the leafy tent. A good many people had gone, scared by the thunder-clouds. Lady Fridoline had deserted her post in the portico, tired of saying good-bye, and was taking a hasty cup of tea amidst a little knot of intimates. She was lamenting the non-arrival of some one.

"So shameful to disappoint me, after distinctly promising to be here," she said.

"Who is the defaulter, dear Lady Fridoline?" asked Mrs. Champion.

"Mr. Jermyn, the new thought-reader."

"Jermyn!" echoed a middle-aged man, who was attending to Lady Fridoline's tea, "Jermyn, the mystery man. I should hardly call him by the old name of thought-reader. He marks a new departure in the region of the uncanny. He is not content with picking up pins, or finding unconsidered trifles. He unearths people's secrets, reads their hidden lives in a most uncomfortable way. I have seen a large party reduced to gloom by half an hour of Mr. Jermyn. I would as soon invite Mephistopheles to a garden-party. But people are so morbid, they will hazard anything for a new sensation."

"It is something to touch only the fringe of other worlds," replied Lady Fridoline, "and whatever Mr. Jermyn's power may be, it lies beyond the plummet line of *our* thought or touch. He told me of circumstances in my own life that it was impossible for him to have discovered except by absolute divination."

"Then you believe in his power of divination?" asked Mrs. Champion, with languid interest.

"I can't help believing."

"Yes, because you have not found out the trick of the thing. There is always a trick in these things, which is inevitably found out sooner or later; and then people wonder that they can have been so foolish as to believe," said Mrs. Champion.

The curtain of leaves parted as she spoke, and a young man came through the opening—a young man whom Lady Fridoline welcomed eagerly.

"I was just telling my friends how disappointed I should be if you did not come," she said, and then, turning to Edith Champion, she introduced the new-comer as Mr. Jermyn.

"Lady Fridoline has been trying to make us feel creepy by her description of your occult powers, Mr. Jermyn," said Mrs. Champion, "but you do not look a very alarming personage."

"Lady Fridoline exaggerated my poor gifts in her infinite kindness," replied Jermyn, with a laugh that had a gnome-like sound to Mrs. Champion's ears.

"Mr. Jermyn was a pleasant-looking young man, tall, slim, and fair, with a broad, strongly marked brow, which receded curiously above the temples, and with hair and moustache of that pale yellowish hue which seems most appropriate to the faun and satyr races. Something in the way this short curling hair was cut about brow and ears, or in the shape of the ears themselves, suggested the satyr type; otherwise there was nothing in the young man's physiognomy, bearing, or dress which made him different from other well-bred and well-dressed men of his age. His laugh had a fresh and joyous ring, which made it agreeable to hear, and he laughed often, looking at the commonest things in a mirthful spirit.

Lady Fridoline insisted upon his taking some refreshment, and when he had disposed of a lemon-ice, she carried him off for a stroll round the lawn, eager to let people see her latest celebrity. There was a little buzz of talk, and an obvious excitement,in the air as he passed group after group. He had shown himself rarely in society, and his few performances had been greatly discussed and written about. Letters exalting him as a creature gifted with superhuman powers had alternated with letters denouncing him as an impostor in one of the most popular daily papers. The people who are always ready to believe in the impossible were loud in the assertion of his good faith, and would not hear of trickery or imposture.

There was an eager expectation of some manifestation of his powers this afternoon, as he walked across the lawn with Lady Fridoline, and people who had been on the point of departure lingered in the hope of being thrilled and frightened, as they had heard of other people being thrilled and frightened, by this amiable-looking youth with the fair complexion and yellow hair. The very incongruity of that fair and youthful aspect with the ghastly or the supernatural made Justin Jermyn so much the more interesting.

He walked about the grounds with his hostess for some time, all her duties of leave-taking suspended, and she to all appearance absorbed in earnest conversation with the Fate-Revealer, every one watchful and expectant. Hillersdon and Mrs. Champion were sitting side by side upon a rustic bench, the lady no longer in a hurry to depart.

"You don't believe in any nonsense of this kind, I know," she said, in her low, listless voice, without looking at her companion.

"I believe in nothing but disillusion, the falsehood inherent in all things."

"You are in an unhappy mood to-day, I think," she said, with a touch of interest.

"Atmospherical, perhaps," he answered, with a laugh. "You can hardly expect anybody to feel very happy under that leaden sky."

Lady Fridoline and her companion had separated. He was walking towards the house; she was going rapidly from group to group, talking and explaining with animated gestures.

"There is going to be a performance," said Mrs. Champion, rising. "If there is any excitement to be had let us have our share of it."

"You want the secrets of your life to be read?" asked Gerard.

"Yes, yes, yes. I want to see what modern magic can do."

"And you are not afraid? That is because yours is only a surface life—an existence that begins and ends in wealth and luxury, fine clothes and fine horses. What have you to fear from sorcery? There are no more secrets in your life than in a doll's life."

"You are very impertinent."

"I am going away, and I can afford to quarrel with you. Would to God I could stir some kind of feeling in you—yes, even make you angry before I go."

"I am afraid you are an egotist," she said, smiling at him with lovely, inscrutable eyes.

She went across the lawn to Lady Fridoline.

"Are we going to have any magic?" she asked.

"You must not utter that word before Mr. Jermyn, unless you want to offend him. He has a horror of any idea of that kind. He calls his wonderful gift only insight, the power to look through the face into the mind behind it, and from the mind to the life which the mind has shaped and guided. He claims no occult power—only a keener vision than the common run of mankind. He is going to sit in the library for the next half-hour, and if anybody wants to test his powers they can go in—one at a time—and talk to him."

Anybody seemed likely to be everybody in this case, for there was a general and hurried movement towards the house.

"Come," said Edith Champion peremptorily, and she and Hillersdon followed the crowd, getting in advance of most people, with swift, vigorous steps.

The library at Fridoline House was a large room that occupied nearly the whole of one wing. It was approached by a corridor, and Mrs. Champion and her escort found this corridor choked with people, all eager to interview Mr. Jermyn.

The approach to the oracle was strongly defended, however, by two gentlemen, who had been told off for that purpose, one being a Colonel of Engineers and the other a Professor of Natural Science.

"We shall never get through this herd," said Gerard, looking with infinite contempt at the throng of smart people, all panting for a new sensation. "Let us try the other door."

He was an intimate at Fridoline House, and knew his way to the small ante-room at the back of the library. If the door of that room were unguarded he and his companion might surprise the wizard, and steal a march upon all that expectant frivolity in the corridor. The whole thing was beneath contempt, no doubt, and he, Gerard Hillersdon, was not even faintly interested in it, but it interested Edith Champion, and he was anxious to gratify her whim.

He led her round by the hall and Lady Fridoline's boudoir, to the room behind the library, opened the door ever so gently, and listened to the voices within.

"It is wonderful, positively wonderful," said a voice in awe-stricken undertones.

"Are you satisfied, madam? Have I told you enough?" asked Jermyn.

"More than enough. You have made me utterly miserable."

Then came the flutter of a silken skirt, and the opening and closing of a door, and then Jermyn looked quickly towards that other door which Hillersdon was holding ajar.

"Who's there?" he asked.

"A lady who would like to talk with you before you are exhausted by that clamorous herd in the corridor. May she come to you at once?"

"It is Mrs. Champion," said Jermyn. "Yes, let her come in."

"He could not possibly have seen me," whispered Edith Champion, who had been standing behind the door.

"He divined your presence. He is no more a magician than I am in that matter," said Hillersdon, as she passed him, and closed the door behind her.

She came out after a five minutes' conference, much paler than when she entered.

"Well, has he told the lovely doll her latest secret, the mystery of a new gown from Felix or Raunitz?" asked Gerard.

"I will see you now, if you have anything to say to me, Mr. Hillersdon," said Jermyn airily.

"I am with you in a moment," answered Gerard, lingering on the threshold, and holding Mrs. Champion's hand in both of his. "Edith, what has he said to you? you look absolutely frightened."

"Yes, he has frightened me—frightened me by telling me my own thoughts. I did not know I was so full of sin. Let me go, Gerard. He has made me hate myself. He will do as much for you, perhaps. He will make you odious in your own eyes. Yes, go to him; hear all that he can tell you."

She broke from him, and hurried away, he looking after her anxiously. Then, with a troubled sigh, he went to hear what this new adept of a doubtful science might have to say to him.

The library was always in shadow at this hour, and now, with that grey threatening sky outside the long narrow Queen Anne windows, the room was wrapped in a wintry darkness, against which the smiling countenance of the diviner stood out in luminous relief.

"Sit down, Mr. Hillersdon, I am not going to hurry because of that mob outside," said Jermyn gaily, throwing himself back in the capacious arm-chair, and turning his beaming face towards

Hillersdon. "I am interested in the lady who has just left me, and I am still more interested in you."

"I ought to feel honoured by that interest," said Hillersdon, "but I confess to a doubt of its reality. What can you know of a man whom you have seen for the first time within the last half-hour?"

"I am so sorry for you," said Jermyn, ignoring the direct question, "so sorry. A young man of your natural gifts—clever, handsome, well-bred—to be so tired of life already, so utterly despondent of the future and its infinite chances, that you are going to throw up the sponge, and make an end of it all to-night. It is really too sad."

Hillersdon stared at him in blank amazement. Justin Jermyn made the statement as if it were the most natural thing in the world that he should have fathomed another man's intention.

"I cannot accept compassion from any one, least of all from a total stranger," said Hillersdon, after that moment of surprise. "Pray what is there in my history or my appearance that moves you to this wild conjecture?"

"No matter by what indications I read your mind," answered Jermyn lightly. "You know I have read you right. You are one of my easiest cases; everything about you is obvious—stares me full in the face. The lady who has just left us needed a subtler power of interpretation. She does not wear her heart upon her sleeve; and yet I think she will admit that I startled her. As for you, my dear fellow, I am particularly frank with you because I want to prevent your carrying out that foolish notion of yours. The worst thing that a man can do with his life is to throw it away."

"I admit no man's right to offer me advice."

"You think that is out of my line. I am a fortune-teller, and nothing else. Well, I will tell you your fortune, Mr. Hillersdon, if you like. You will not carry out your present intention—yet awhile, or in the mode and manner you have planned. Good afternoon." He dismissed his visitor with a careless nod as he rose to open the door communicating with the corridor, whence came a buzz of eager voices, mixed with light laughter. People were prepared to be startled, yet could but regard the whole business in a somewhat jocular spirit. It was only the select few who gave Justin Jermyn credit for occult power.

CHAPTER II.

"OH, PITIFUL YOUNG MAN, STRUCK BLIND WITH BEAUTY."

EDITH CHAMPION was one of the handsomest women in London, a woman whose progress was followed at all great parties and public gatherings by the hum of an admiring multitude, whispering her praises, or telling the uninformed that the dark-eyed woman with the tall, Juno-like form was *the* Mrs. Champion. Four years ago she had been one of a trio of lovely sisters, the daughters of an impecunious Yorkshire squire, a man who had wasted a fine fortune on the turf, and was ending his days in debt and difficulty at a moated grange in the West Riding. The three lovely sisters were such obviously marketable property that aunts and uncles were quick to compassionate their forlorn condition, and they were duly launched in London society. The two elder were young women of singular calmness and perspicuity, and got themselves well married, the first to a wealthy baronet, the second to a marquis, without giving trouble to anybody concerned in the transaction; but the youngest girl, Edith, showed herself wayward and wilful, and expressed an absurd desire to marry Gerard Hillersdon, the man she loved. This desire was frustrated, but not so promptly as it should have been, and the young lady contrived to make her attachment public property before uncles or aunts could crush the flowers of sentiment under the hoof of worldly wisdom. But the sentiment was crushed somehow, the world knew not with how many tears, or with what girlish pleading for mercy, and the season after this foolish entanglement Edith Champion accepted the addresses of an elderly stockbroker and reputed millionaire, who made a handsomer settlement than the middle-aged marquis had made upon her elder sister.

Mr. Champion was good-natured and unsuspicious, his mind being almost entirely absorbed in that exciting race for wealth which had been the business of his life from boyhood. He wanted a beautiful wife as the solace of his declining years, and the one thing needed to complete the costly home which he had built for himself on a heathy ridge among those romantic hills where Surrey overlooks Sussex. The wife was the final piece of furniture to be chosen for this splendid mansion, and he had chosen that crowning ornament in a deliberate and leisurely manner. He was the last man to plague himself by any subtle questionings as to the sentiments of the lady so honoured, or to be harassed by doubts of her fidelity. He had no objection to seeing his wife surrounded by youthful admirers. Was she not meant to be admired, as much as his pictures and statues? He found no fault with the chosen band of "nice boys" who attended her afternoon at home, or crowded the back of her box when the curtain was down at opera-house or theatre; and if Gerard Hillersdon were more constant than all the others in his attendance, the fact never presented itself in any unpleasant light to Mr. Champion. Had he given himself the trouble to think about his wife's relations with her *cavaliere servente* he would most assuredly have told himself that she was much too well placed to overstep the limits of prudence, and that no woman in her right senses would abandon a palace in Surrey and a model house in Hertford Street for the caravanseries that lodge the *divorcée.* He would have remembered also with satisfaction that his wife's settlement, liberal as it was, would be made null and void by a divorce.

And thus for three years of his life—perhaps the best and brightest years in a man's life, from twenty-five to twenty-eight—Gerard Hillersdon had given up all his thoughts, aspirations, and dreams to the most hopeless of all love affairs, an attachment to an irreproachable matron, a woman who had accepted her lot as an unloving wife and who meant to do her duty, in her own cold and measured way, to an unloved husband; yet who clung to the memory of a girlish love and fostered the passion of her lover, caring, or at least seeming to care, nothing for his peace, and never estimating the wrong she was doing him.

To this passion everything in the young man's life had been sacrificed. He had begun his career on fire with ambition, believing in his capacity to succeed in more than one profession; and in the first flush of his manhood he had done some really good work in imaginative literature, had written a novel which took the town, and had made his brief success as an original writer, romantic, light of touch, unconventional; but he had been drifted into idleness by a woman who treated him as some queen or princess in the days of chivalry might have treated her page. She spoilt his career, just when a lasting success was within his reach, needing only earnestness and industry on his part. She had wasted the golden days of his youth, and had given him in exchange only smiles and sweet words, and a place at her dinner-table in a house where he had lost all prestige from being seen too often, the one inevitable guest whose presence counted for nothing. He had been in all things her slave, offending the people she disliked, and wasting his attention and his substance on her favourites, faithful to her caprice of the hour, were it never so foolish.

And now after three years of this fond slavery the end had come. He was ruined, and was worse than ruined. He had been living from hand to mouth, writing for magazines and newspapers, earning a good deal of money in a casual way, but never enough to keep him out of debt; and now he saw bankruptcy staring him in the face, and with bankruptcy dishonour, for he had gambling debts which, as the son of a country parson, he ought never to have incurred, and which it would be disgrace not to pay.

Had this dread of disgrace been his only trouble, he might have treated it as other men have treated such dark episodes. He might have told himself that England is not the world, and that there is always room for youth and daring under the tropic stars, and that the name with which a man has been labelled at starting in life is not so interwoven with his being that he need mind changing it for another, and giving himself a fresh start. He might have reasoned thus had he still felt the delight in life which makes the adventurer live down shame and set his face to untrodden worlds across the sea. But he had no such delight. The zest of life had gone out of him. Love itself had lost all fervour. He hardly knew whether he cared any more for the woman to whom he had sacrificed his youth, whether the flame of love had not expired altogether amidst the vacuity of two conventional existences. The only thing which he knew for certain was that he loved no other woman, and that he took no interest in life adequate to the struggle it would cost him to live through the crisis that was coming.

And thus, with all serious consideration, he had decided upon a sudden exit from a scene which no longer interested him. Yet with a curious inconsistency he wanted to spend his last hours in Edith Champion's society, and never had he seemed gayer or happier than he seemed that evening at the triangular dinner in Hertford Street.

They were dining in a little octagon room at the back of the house, a room upholstered like a tent, and furnished in so Oriental a fashion that it seemed a solecism to be sitting upon chairs, and not to be eating pillau or kibobs with one's fingers. The clerical cousin was a very agreeable personage—plump and rosy, strongly addicted to good living, and looking upon the beautiful Mrs. Champion as a being whose normal state was to be adored by well-bred young men, and to dispense hospitality to poor relations.

Not a word was said about Justin Jermyn throughout the dinner, but while Gerard was helping Mrs. Champion to put on her cloak, she asked suddenly—

"How did you get on with the Fate-reader?"

"Very badly. He struck me as an insolent *farceur*. I wonder society can encourage such a person."

"Yes, he is decidedly insolent. I was rather scared by the things he said to me, but a few minutes' thought showed me that his talk was mere guess work. I shall never ask him to any party of mine."

"You must have rushed away in a great hurry. I was only five minutes closeted with the oracle, but when I went to the hall you and your carriage had vanished."

"I had an irresistible desire to get out of the house. I felt as if I were escaping from Tophet; and then I had to call for Mrs. Gresham"—the cousin—"at the Knightsbridge Riding School, where the poor thing had been slaving at Lady Penniddock's refreshment stall."

"It was abject slavery," protested Mrs. Gresham. "I'm afraid I shall detest tea and coffee all the days of my life, and I was so fond of them"—with profound regret. "The very look of a bath bun will make me ill."

"*Dépêchons*," said Mrs. Champion. "We shall hear very little of the new Zerlina if we go on dawdling here."

And so in a feverish hurry she led the way to her carriage, where there was just room enough for Gerard on the front seat.

CHAPTER III.

"THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY."

The opera house was not brilliantly filled. There were a great many important functions going on that evening, events thickening as the season sloped towards its close, and it may be that the new Zerlina had not been sufficiently puffed, or that those enthusiasts who can never have too much Mozart are only the minority among opera-goers. There were a good many blank spaces in the stalls, and a good many untenanted boxes, nor was the display of diamonds and beauty as dazzling as it might have been.

In an audience at half power Mrs. Champion's commanding loveliness and Mrs. Champion's tiara of diamond stars shone conspicuous. She was dressed with that careless air which was her speciality, in some filmy fabric of daffodil colour, which was arranged in loose folds across her bust and shoulders, caught here and there, as if at random, with a diamond star. A great cluster of yellow orchids was fastened on one shoulder, and there were yellow orchids pinned on her black lace fan, while long black gloves gave a touch of eccentricity to her toilette. Her one object in dressing herself was to be different from other women. She never wore the fashionable colour or the fashionable fabric, but gloried in opposition, and took infinite pains to find something in Paris or Vienna which nobody was wearing in London.

The awe-inspiring music which closes the second act, and seems to presage the horror of the scenes that are coming, was hurrying to its brilliant finish, when Gerard, looking idly down upon the stalls, started at sight of the man who had mystified him more than any other human being had ever done. There, lounging in his place between two unoccupied seats, he saw Justin Jermyn, apparently enjoying the music with that keen delight which only the real music-lover can feel. His head was thrown back, his thin pale lips were slightly parted, and his large blue eyes beamed with rapture. Yes, a man who passionately loved music, or else a consummate actor.

The very presence of the man recalled Gerard Hillersdon to the business which was to be done after the green curtain had fallen, and his fair companions had been handed into their carriage. Ten minutes in a hansom, and he would be in his lodgings, and there would be no excuse for delay. His time would have come before the clock of St. James's Church struck midnight. He had looked at his pistol-case involuntarily while he was dressing for the evening. He knew where it stood ready to his hand; and close beside the pistol-case was a business-like letter from his landlord requesting the settlement of a long account for rent and maintenance—only such breakfasts and casual meals as a young man of fashion takes at his lodgings—which had mounted to formidable figures. And an ounce of lead was to be the sole settlement. For the first time in his life Mr. Hillersdon felt sorry for those eminently respectable people, his landlord and landlady. He began to consider whether he ought not at least to shoot himself out of doors, rather than to inflict upon an old-established lodging-house the stigma of a suicide; but the inconvenience of self-destruction *sub jove* was too apparent to him, and he felt that he must be selfish in this final act of a selfish life.

Yes, there sat Justin Jermyn, complacent, full of enjoyment; the man who had told him what he was going to do. How the modern sorcerer would pride himself upon that fore-knowledge to-morrow when the evening papers told of the deed that had been done. There would doubtless be a paragraph in the papers—three lines at most—and perhaps a line on the contents bill: DISTRESSING SUICIDE OF A GENTLEMAN. Suicides are always described as distressing when the self-slaughterer is of gentle blood.

He felt angry with Jermyn for having contrived to haunt these closing hours of his life. He sat watching the sorcerer all through the last act of the opera, noting his elfin enjoyment of all that was diabolical in the music and the libretto. How he grinned at the discomfiture of Don Giovanni! how he rocked himself with laughter at the abject terror of Leperello! No one approached him as an acquaintance. He sat in complete isolation, but in supreme enjoyment, apparently the happiest man in that great theatre, the youngest and the freshest in the capacity to enjoy.

"And that laughing fool read my purpose as if my brain had been an open book," mused Hillersdon savagely.

His anger was not lessened when he glanced round while he was conducting Mrs. Champion to her carriage, and saw the Fate-reader's slim, supple figure behind him, and the Fate-reader's gnome-like countenance smiling at him under an opera hat.

"I am so sorry you are leaving London so soon," said Edith

Champion, as he lingered at the carriage-door for the one half-minute allowed by the Jack in office at his elbow.

She gave him her hand, and even pressed the hand which held hers, with more sentiment than she was wont to show.

"Drive on, coachman," shouted the Commissionaire. "Now then, next carriage."

No time for sentimental partings there!

Hillersdon walked away from the theatre, meaning to pick up the first hansom that offered itself. He had not gone three steps along the Bow Street pavement when Jermyn was close beside him.

"Are you going home, Mr. Hillersdon?" he asked, in a friendly tone. "Delightful opera, 'Don Giovanni,' ain't it? The best out and away. 'Faust' is my next favourite; but even Gounod can't touch Mozart."

"I dare say not; but I am no connoisseur. Good night, Mr. Jermyn. I am going home immediately."

"Don't. Come and have some supper with me. I only half told your fortune this afternoon, you were so infernally impatient. I have a good deal more to tell you. Come and have some supper in my chambers."

"Some other night, perhaps, Mr. Jermyn. I am going straight home."

"And you mean there shall be no other nights in your life?" said Jermyn, in a low, silky voice that made Hillersdon savage, for it jarred upon his irritated nerves more than the harshest accents could have done.

"Good night," he said curtly, turning on his heel.

Jermyn was not to be repulsed.

"Come home with me," he said; "I won't leave you while you have the suicide's line on your forehead. Come to supper with me, Hillersdon. I have a brand of champagne that will smooth out that ugly wrinkle, if you'll only give the stuff a fair trial."

"I don't know where you live, and I don't care a jot for your wines or anybody else's. I am leaving town to-morrow morning, and I want my last hours in London for my own purposes."

Jermyn put his arm through Hillersdon's, wheeled him round in the direction of Long-acre, and quietly led him away. That was his answer to Hillersdon's testy speech, and the young man submitted, feeling a *vis inertiæ*, a languid indifference which made him consentient to a stranger's will, having lost all will-power of his own.

He was angry with Jermyn, yet even more angry with himself, and in that perturbation of mind, tempered curiously with supineness, he took but little note of which way they went. He remembered going by Lincoln's Inn Fields and the Turnstile. He remembered crossing Holborn, but knew not afterwards whether the shabby, squalid looking Inn, beneath whose gloomy gate-house Jermyn led him, did, or did not, open directly out of the great thoroughfare.

He remembered always that it was a most dismal assemblage of tall, shabby houses, forming a quadrangle, in whose stony centre there was a dilapidated basin, which might once have been a fountain. The summer moon, riding high and fast among wind-tossed clouds, shone full into the stony yard, and lit up the shabby fronts of the houses, but not one lamp-lit window cheered with the suggestion of life and occupation.

"Do you mean to say you live in this ghastly hole?" he exclaimed, speaking for the first time since they left Bow Street; "it looks as if it were tenanted by a company of ghosts."

"A good many of the houses are empty, and I dare say the ghosts of dead usurers and dishonest lawyers and broken-hearted clients do have a high time in the old rooms now and again," answered Jermyn, with his irrepressible laugh; "but I have never seen any company but rats, mice, and such small deer, as Bacon says. Of course, he *was* Bacon. We're all agreed upon that."

Hillersdon ignored this frivolity, and stood dumbly, while Jermyn put his key into a door, opened it, and led the way into a passage that was pitch dark. Not a pleasant situation to be alone in a dark passage at midnight in a sparely inhabited block of buildings quite cut off from the rest of the world, in company with a man whose repute was decidedly diabolical.

Jermyn struck a match and lighted a small hand-lamp, which improved the situation just a little.

"My den is on the second floor," he said, "and I've made the place pretty comfortable inside, though it looks rather uncanny outside."

He led the way up an old oak staircase, narrow, shabby, and unadorned, but oak-panelled, and therefore precious in the eyes of those who cling fondly to the past and to that old London which is so swiftly vanishing off the face of the earth.

The little lamp gave but just light enough to make the darkness of the staircase visible, till they came to a landing where the moon looked in through the murky panes of a tall window, and anon to a higher landing, where a vivid streak of lamplight under a door gave the first token of habitation. Jermyn opened this door, and his guest stood half-blinded by the brilliant light, and not a little astonished by the elegant luxury of those two rooms, opening into each other with a wide archway, which Mr. Jermyn had denominated his "den."

Hillersdon had been in many bachelor-rooms within the precincts of The Albany, in Piccadilly, St. James's, and Mayfair, but he had seen nothing more studiously luxurious than the Fate-reader's den. Heavy velvet curtains, of darkish green, draped the shuttered windows. The ingle-nook was quaint, artistic, comfortable; the glistening tiles were decorated with storks and sea-birds, which might have been painted by Stacey Marks himself. The furniture was all that is most rare and genuine in the relics of the Chippendale era. The carpet was a marvel of Oriental undertones, and Oriental richness of fabric. The few pieces of pottery which made spots of vivid colour here and there amidst the prevailing sombreness of hue, were choicest specimens of Indian and Italian ware. The pictures were few. A Judas, by Titian; a wood nymph, naked and unashamed, against a background of dark foliage, by Guido; and three curious bits of the early German school, made up the show of art, save for a bust of the Fate-reader in black marble, a curiously faithful likeness, in which the faun-like character of the head, and the elfin smile, were but slightly accentuated. This bust stood upon a pedestal of dark red porphyry, and seemed to command the room.

The inner room was furnished as a library. There the lamps were shaded and the light subdued. Here, under the centre lamp that hung low over the small round table appeared all the arrangements for a dainty little supper. Two covered dishes on a chafing dish; a truffled pullet and a miniature York ham, a lobster salad, strawberries, peaches, champagne in a brazen ice-pail, ornamented with Bacchanalian figures in repoussé work.

"My servant has gone to bed," said Jermyn, "but he has left everything ready, and we can wait upon each other. Cutlets, salmi aux olives," he said, lifting the covers; "which will you start with?"

"Neither, thanks. I told you I had no appetite."

"Discouraging to a man who is as hungry as a hunter," retorted

Jermyn, helping himself. "Try that Madeira, it may give you an appetite."

Hillersdon seated himself opposite his host and took a glass of wine. His curiosity was stimulated by the Fate-reader's surroundings; and, after all, the thing which he had to do might remain undone for a few hours. He could not help being interested in this young man, who, either by instinct or by a subtle guess, had fathomed his purpose. The luxury of these rooms piqued him, so striking a contrast with the shabbiness of his own West End lodging, albeit that lodging was far from cheap. He was supposed to pay for "situation." Of luxury he had nothing, of comfort very little. How did Jermyn contrive to be so well off, he wondered? Did he live by fate-reading, or had he means of his own?

Jermyn was eating his supper all this time with a fine appetite and an epicurean gusto. After a couple of glasses of Madeira, his guest helped himself to lobster salad, and when Jermyn opened the champagne the two men were hobnobbing comfortably, and, that wine being choice of its kind and admirably iced, Hillersdon drank the best part of a bottle, and found himself enjoying his supper more than he had enjoyed anything in the way of meat and drink for a long time.

The conversation during supper was of the lightest, Jermyn letting off his criticisms, mostly unfavourable, upon people known to them both, and laughing tremendously at his own wit. He was careful not to mention Mrs. Champion, however, and Hillersdon had no objection to spatter mud upon the ruck of his acquaintance. Supper over, and a box of cigars open between them, with a silver spirit-lamp, shaped like a serpent offering its flaming jaws for their use, the men grew more serious. It was past one o'clock. They had been a long time over their supper, and they seemed no longer strangers—intimates, rather, not united by any particular esteem for each other, but one in their contempt for other people.

"The champagne has wiped out that ugly wrinkle already," said Jermyn, with his friendly air; "and now tell me what could induce you to contemplate such a thing."

"What thing?" asked Hillersdon, waxing moody.

Jermyn's reply was pantomimic. He passed his hand across his throat, significant of a razor; he turned his hand towards his open mouth, suggestive of a pistol; he tossed off an imaginary poison draught.

"You insist upon suggesting—— " began Hillersdon, angrily.

"I tell you I saw it in your face. The man who contemplates suicide has a look which no man who reads the human countenance can mistake. There is a fixed horror in the eyes, as of one who stares into the unknown, and knows that he is nearing the mystery of life and death. There are perplexed lines about the brow, 'shall I, or shall I not?' and there is a nervous hurry, as of one who wants to get a disagreeable business over as soon as may be. I have never been mistaken yet in *that* look. Why, my dear fellow, why? Surely life at eight and twenty is too precious a thing to be frittered away for a trifle."

"'You take my life when you do take the means by which I live,'" quoted Hillersdon.

"Bacon again! That fellow has something to say about everything. You imply that you are impecunious, and would rather be dead than penniless."

"Take it so, if you please."

"Good. Now, how can you tell that fortune is not waiting for you at some turn in the road you know not; that road of the future which no man knows till he treads it? So long as a man is alive he has always a chance of becoming a millionaire. So long as a woman is unmarried there is always the possibility of her marrying a duke."

"The chance of fortune in my case is so remote that it is not worth considering. I am the son of a country parson. I have no relative living likely to leave me the smallest legacy. Unless I could make a fortune by literature, I have no chance of making one by any exertion of my own, and my second book was so dire a failure that I have it not in me to write a third."

"Fortunes drop from the clouds sometimes. Have you never done any rich man a service which might prompt him—when distributing superfluous thousands—to leave a few to you?"

"Never, within my recollection."

"Come, now, looking back at your life, is there no act in it of which you might fairly be proud, no touch of the heroic, no deed worthy a paragraph in the papers?"

"None. I once saved an old man's life; but I doubt if the life were worth saving, since the old wretch did not trouble himself to thank me for having risked my own life in his service."

"You saved an old man's life, at hazard of your own! Come, that sounds heroic," cried Jermyn, flinging his fair head back against the blackish green of the velvet chair cover, and laughing with all his might. The black bust showed a little to the left, above the level of his head, and it seemed to Hillersdon that the black face was laughing as broadly as the white one.

"Tell me the whole story—pray now—it sounds absolutely heroic," urged Jermyn.

"There is very little to tell," replied Hillersdon, coolly. "Nothing either to laugh at or to be thrilled by. I did only what any other active young man would have done in my position, seeing a feeble old man in peril of immediate death. It was at Nice. You know what a wilderness of iron the railway station there is, and how one has to hunt about for one's train. It was at carnival time, dusk, and a great many people were going back to Cannes, I myself among them. The old man had arrived from another train going eastwards, and was making for the platform, when a great high engine bore steadily down upon him, by no means at express speed, but fast enough to paralyse him, so that, instead of getting out of the way, he stood staring, hesitating, helpless. An instant more, and that vast mass of iron would have cut him down and dashed the life out of him. I had but time to drag him out of the track before the engine passed me, brushing my shoulder as it went by. I took him to the platform. Hardly any one had seen our adventure. I had a friend with me at the station, with whom I had lunched at the Cosmopolitan, and who had insisted on seeing me off. I told him briefly what had happened, left the old man in his care, and rushed back to look for my own train, which I caught by the skin of my teeth."

"And the old churl never thanked you?"

"Not by one civil word. His only remark was an inquiry about his umbrella, which had fallen out of his hand when I plucked him from the jaws of death. I believe he felt himself aggrieved because I had not rescued his umbrella as well as himself."

"Was he English, do you think?"

"Distinctly British. A Frenchman or Italian would at least have been loquacious, if not grateful."

"The shock may have made him speechless."

"He found speech to inquire after his umbrella."

"True, that looked black!" said Jermyn, laughing; "I'm afraid he must have been a thankless old dog. And you took no trouble to find out who he was, I suppose—what manner of man you had snatched from sudden death?"

"I had not the slightest interest in his identity."

"So! Well, now, let us talk still further of yourself and your prospects. You know that people call me the Fate-reader. Now, I have a fancy that your fortunes are on the threshold of a great change—and that, apart from the folly of anticipating Death, the inevitable enemy, in your case it may be very much worth while to live."

"You are vague and general. What form of good fortune do you predict for me?"

"I pretend to no gift of prophecy. I only profess the power of insight. I can read what men are—not what is going to happen to them; but as in many cases character is fate, I have been able to hazard some shrewd guesses about the future."

"And in my case, what are your guesses?"

"I would rather not tell you."

"The outlook is not satisfactory, then?"

"Not altogether. The character of a man who at eight and twenty can contemplate suicide as the shortest way out of his embarrassments is not a character that promises well. I am frank, you see."

"Vastly frank."

"Don't be angry," laughed Jermyn. "I pretend to be no hero myself, and if I were very hard up, or very much bored, I dare say I too might think of a bullet or a dose of prussic acid. Only that kind of idea argues a character at once weak and selfish. The man who takes his own life runs away from the universal battle, and shows a selfish indifference to those he leaves behind, in whose minds the memory of his death will be a lasting pain."

"My poor mother," sighed Hillersdon, recognising the truth of this assertion.

"You would have killed yourself because you were ennuied and unhappy; because you have wasted opportunities, and given the best years of your life to a hopeless passion. Your reasons were not strong enough; and even if I were not here to demonstrate your folly, I think your hand must have faltered at the last moment, and you would have asked yourself—Is the outlook so very black after all? Does not one gleam of light pierce the darkness?"

"The outlook is as black as pitch," answered Hillersdon, expanding under the influence of the wine he had been drinking so freely, ready now to talk to this acquaintance of a day as if he were his bosom friend and companion of years; "there is not a gleam of light, not one! I have wasted my chances; I have frittered away whatever talent or capacity I may have possessed when I left the University. I am a dependent upon a father who can ill afford to support a son in idleness, and to whom I ought to be a help rather than a burden. I have been—and must be as long as I live—the slave of a woman who exacts servitude and gives nothing—whose heart and mind after years of closest association are still mysteries to me; who will not own that she loves me, yet will not let me go."

"Mrs. Champion is a remarkably clever woman," said Jermyn, coolly; "but there are depths which you have never fathomed under that calm and virtuous surface. Leave her for another divinity, and you will see of what she is capable. If that hopeless attachment is your only trouble, I snap my fingers at the necessity of suicide. A day, an hour may bring you face to face with a woman whose influence will make you forget Edith Champion."

"You have no right to make free with Mrs. Champion's name. How do you know that she has any influence over my life?"

"I know what all the world knows—your world of Mayfair and Belgravia, Hyde Park and South Kensington—and I know what I read in the lady's face. A dangerous woman for you, Mr. Hillersdon; witness these wasted years of which you complain. But there are women as fair, to love whom would be a less abject servitude. Do you remember the vision that Mephistopheles showed Faust in the witch's kitchen?"

"Gretchen at her spinning-wheel!"

"Gretchen at her wheel belongs to the opera, I fancy. The vision Faust saw in the witch's looking-glass was the vision of abstract beauty. You may remember that when he sees Gretchen in the street there is no recognition of that supernal face he had just seen in the glass. He was only caught by a pretty girl tripping modestly home from church. The vision may have been Aphrodite or Helen, for aught we know. A clever trick, no doubt, that vision in the glass. Look yonder, Hillersdon, look at that face there, known to you in the past—the face of a girl steeped in poverty, beautiful as a dream, yet no better off in this world for her loveliness. Look at that fragile form bending over a sewing-machine, our modern substitute for the spinning-wheel. Look at me, Hillersdon," repeated Jermyn, fixing him with those cold, calm, blue eyes, from which there radiated a sudden influence that steeped Gerard Hillersdon's senses in a dreamy light, as of another world and atmosphere; "and now look yonder."

He waved his hand carelessly towards the inner room, where in the subdued light Hillersdon saw the figure of a girl, shadowy, dim, and vague at first, and then developing gradually from pale grey shadow into luminous distinctness. The face was turned to him, but the eyes saw him not; they gazed sadly out into space, full of hopeless melancholy, while the hands moved monotonously backwards and forwards across the table of a sewing-machine. A girl in a grey cotton frock, sitting at work at a sewing-machine. That was the vision Gerard Hillersdon saw against the dark background of Mr. Jermyn's library; but the girl's pinched and pallid face was as beautiful in form as the face of Raffaelle's loveliest Madonna, and in its profound melancholy there was a sweetness that melted his heart. Something, too, in that fair Gretchen-like countenance struck him as strangely familiar. He had seen the face before, not in a picture or in a statue, but in commonplace everyday life. When or where he knew not.

Jermyn threw his half-smoked cigar up into the air, and burst into his elfin laugh. The vision faded on the instant, as if he had laughed it away.

"There is your modern Gretchen," he said, "a poor little sempstress, slaving from dawn to dark for daily bread, as beautiful as a Greek goddess, and virtuous enough to prefer poverty to degradation. There is your true type of a nineteenth-century Gretchen. How would you like to be Faust?"

"I should like to possess Faust's power; not to betray Gretchen, but to secure my own happiness."

"And what is your idea of happiness?" asked Jermyn, lighting a fresh cigar.

"Wealth," answered Hillersdon, quickly. "For a man who has lived under the goad of poverty, who has felt day by day, and hour by hour, the torment of being poorer than his fellow-men, there can be but one idea of bliss. Money, and plenty of it. From my school days upwards I have lived among men better off than myself. At the University I got into trouble because I exceeded my allowance. My father could just afford to give me two hundred a year, I spent from three to four hundred; but the excess, though it caused no end of trouble at home, left me still a pauper among men who spent a thousand. I had been sent to an expensive college, and told to economise; to enjoy all the privileges of contact with men of rank and position, to be among them but not of them. I happened to be popular, and so could not altogether seclude myself from my fellow-men. I was pinched and harassed at every turn, and yet plunged in debt, and a malefactor to my family. I came to London, studied for the Bar, ate my dinners, wasted my father's substance on fees, and never got a brief. I wrote a book which won instantaneous success, and for the moment I was rich. I thought I had opened a gold mine, bought my mother a pair of diamond earrings which she did not want, and sent my father a fine set of Jeremy Taylor, which he had been longing for ever since I could remember. I fell in love with a beautiful girl, who reciprocated my affection, but was not allowed to marry a man whose only resources were in his inkstand. She was not inconsolable, and our engagement was no sooner broken than she married a man old enough to be her grandfather, and rich enough to make her a personage in the smart world. My next book, written while I was writhing under the sting of this disappointment, was a dead failure. I had no heart to begin another book. I have lived since, as a good many young men contrive to live in this great city, from hand to mouth, and the emptiness and hopelessness of my life have been known to me for a long time. Do you wonder that I began to think actual nothingness better than this middle state between life and death—this perpetual weariness of an inane and purposeless existence!"

"And you think that wealth would open up a new future, and that life would be no longer aimless?"

"Wealth means power," answered Hillersdon. "With wealth and youth no man should be unhappy, unless racked with physical pain. A rich man is master of the universe."

"Yes, but while he enjoys the power wealth gives, his life is ebbing. Every day of enjoyment, every ardent hope satisfied, every extravagant wish realised, is a nail in his coffin. The men who live longest are men of moderate means—not worried by poverty nor elated by wealth—men in whose obscure and retired lives society takes very little interest—scholars, thinkers, inventors, some of them perhaps, whom the world hears of only after they are dead—men who think, and dream, and reason, but experience nothing of life's feverish movement or man's fiercer passions. Do you remember Balzac's story of the Peau de Chagrin?"

"Not very clearly. It was one of the first French novels I read; a kind of fairy tale, I think."

"It is more an allegory than a fairy tale. A young man, tired of life, like you, is on the brink of suicide—has made up his mind to die, as you made up your mind to-day—when, to beguile the time betwixt afternoon and night, he goes into a bric-à-brac shop and turns over the wonders of worlds old and new. Here, amidst treasures of art and relics of extinct civilisations, he finds the queerest curio of all in the person of the bric-à-brac dealer, a man who boasts of his century and more of life, the quiet passionless life of the thinker. This man shows him the Peau de Chagrin, the skin of a wild ass, hanging against the wall. With that talisman he offers to make the intending suicide richer, more powerful, and more renowned than the king of the French. 'Read,' he cries, and the young man reads a Sanscrit inscription whose letters are so interwoven in the metallic lustre of the skin that no knife can eradicate the faintest line. The Sanscrit translated runs thus:—

'If you possess me you possess all,
But your life will be mine. Wish,
And your wishes will be fulfilled,
But rule your wishes by
Your life. At every wish
I shall dwindle like
Your days. Would'st
Have me,
Take.'

"This inscription is the allegory of life. The old man told the youth how he had offered the talisman to many, but how, though one and all laughed at its possible influence over their future destinies, all had refused to traffic with that unknown power. And for the owner of the talisman, why had he never tested its value? The old man answered that question by expounding his theory of life."

"And what was his theory?"

"'The mystery of human life lies in a nutshell,' said the centenarian. 'The life of action and the life of passion drain the sources of existence. To will, to do, to desire ardently, is to die. With every quickening of the pulse above normal health, with every tumult of the heart, with every fever of the brain, fired by ardent hopes and conflicting wishes, a shred is torn off the fabric of a man's life. The men who live to age like mine are the men whose passions and desires, ambitions and greed of power have been rigidly suppressed, the men of calm and contemplative temperament, in whom mind rises superior to heart and senses, who are content to reason, to know, to see, and understand the world in which they live.' And that old man was right. There is a hidden meaning in that sentence of Holy Writ—The race is not to the swift. If you would live long take life largo, not presto."

"Who cares for length of years?" exclaimed Hillersdon. "What a man wants is to *live*, not to crawl for a century on the face of this planet, afraid to lift his head from the earth lest a thunderbolt should strike him. I wish I could stroll into a bric-à-brac shop and find the peau de chagrin. I would be content to see the talisman dwindle daily, if every diminution marked an hour of happiness, a wish realised."

"Well, I suppose that is the only philosophy of life congenial to a young mind," said Jermyn lightly. "The centenarian who never really lived boasts of length of days, and cheats himself with the idea that he has had the best of the bargain; but to live for ten joyous, reckless years must be better than to vegetate for a century."

"Infinitely better," said Hillersdon, rising in a fever of excitement, and beginning to walk about the room, looking at this and that, the bronze idols, the enamelled vases and old ivory carvings in the niches and recesses of a Bombay blackwood cabinet.

"You have the peau de chagrin hidden somewhere in your rooms, perhaps," he suggested laughingly, "or, at any rate, some talisman which enables you to make light of life—to see a jest where other men see a problem only to be solved by death."

"No, I have no talisman. I have nothing but will—will strong enough to conquer passion—and insight by which I can read the mystery of mankind. You who have a stronger individuality—a passionate, exacting personality, an intolerable ego which must be satisfied somehow—are created to suffer. I am created to enjoy. For me life, as you say, is a jest."

"So it was for Goethe's Devil," answered Hillersdon. "I believe there is a touch of the diabolical in your composition, and that you have about as much heart and conscience as Mephistopheles. However, I am beholden to you for your persistence in bringing me here to-night, for you have amused me, mystified me, stimulated my curiosity, and routed thoughts which I confess were of the darkest."

"Didn't I tell you a supper and a bottle of wine would be your best counsellor?" exclaimed Jermyn, laughing.

"But the dark thoughts will return in a day or two, no doubt, since you have no talisman to offer me which will pour gold into empty pockets, and you do not even propose to buy my shadow. I would run the risk of being as conspicuous as Peter Schlemihl, for the same power to create illimitable heaps of sterling coin."

"Ah, those are old stories—allegories all, be assured. If I were to say I saw the promise of fortune on that perplexed brow of yours you would laugh at me. All I ask is that if Fortune does pour her gifts into your lap you will remember that I bade you tarry at the gate of death."

CHAPTER IV.

"WE ARE SUCH STUFF AS DREAMS ARE MADE OF."

THE domes and steeples of the great city, towers and warehouses, roofs old and new, showed dark against a saffron sky, as Gerard Hillersdon set his face to the west in the freshness and quiet of early morning. He had drunk enough and talked enough to exalt his spirits with an unwonted elation, as if life and the world were new, and all his troubles and perplexities cast off like a slough, and flung behind him into the universal dust-heap men call the Past. There is no Nepenthe like a night's debauch for obliterating worldly cares. Unhappily the effect is but transient, and Memory will resume her sway. In this summer dawning Gerard walked through the empty streets with a tread as light as if his youth had never been shadowed by a care. In this mood of his he accepted Justin Jermyn as a serious fact, a man of unusual gifts and faculties; a man who by fair means or foul had plucked him by the sleeve and held him back from the brink of a dark gulf which he shuddered to think upon.

"To be or not to be?" he muttered, slackening his steps in the morning solitude of Lincoln's Inn, where there were faint odours of foliage and flowers freshened by the dews of night. "To be or not to be? I was a fool to think that my choice was inevitable. Faust had the poison at his lips, when the Easter joybells stayed his hand. And after that burst of heavenly gladness—and after that thrilling chorus, 'Christ is risen'—came the fiend with his worldly-wise philosophy, and his gifts of wealth and power. Is the influence that stayed my hand from heaven or from hell, I wonder?"

His thoughts reverted to the face of the girl at the sewing-machine. He was in no mood to trouble himself as to the nature of the vision he had seen; whether it were hypnotic, or some juggler's trick produced by mechanical means. It was of the face that he thought, for it was a familiar face; a face out of the long ago; and he tried in vain to fix it in his memory. It floated there, vaguely mixed with the vision of his vanished boyhood—a dream of summer and sunny days, of woods and waters, in the far-off west, which seemed as another and half-forgotten world in the midst of this grey, smoke-stained city.

He let himself into the dark and airless lodging-house passage with his latchkey, a privilege he could scarcely hope to enjoy many days longer, unless he could comply with, or compromise, the demand in his landlord's letter. Yet even the possibility of being turned out of doors seemed hardly to trouble him this morning. At the worst he could go down to his father's rectory, and bury himself among green leaves and village faces. And if he must be bankrupt, see his name in the *Gazette*, shameful as the thing would seem to the rural rector and his wife, he would not be the first. Among the youthful scions of the nobility bankruptcy is as common as scarlet fever; nay, almost as inevitable as measles.

His sitting-room and the adjoining bedroom looked shabbier than usual in the clear morning light, after those luxurious rooms of Justin Jermyn's. The furniture had been good enough once upon a time, for its specific purpose—brass bedstead, bird's-eye-maple wardrobe and dressing-table in the bedroom, walnut-wood and cretonne in the sitting-room—but everything in the rooms had grown shabby and squalid with the wear and tear of successive lodgers; and the landlord, crippled by bad debts, had never been rich enough to renew the cretonne, or improve upon the Philistinism of the walnut-wood. A sordid den, repulsive to the eye of a man with any feeling for the beautiful.

Hillersdon was tired and exhausted, but slumber was far from his eyelids, and he knew it was useless to go to bed while his brain was working with a forty-horse power, and his temples were racked with neuralgic pain. He flung himself into an arm-chair, lighted a cigar which Jermyn had thrust upon him at parting, and looked idly round the room.

There were some letters upon the table, at least half a dozen, the usual thing no doubt—bills and threatening letters from lawyers of obscure address, calling his attention to neglected applications from tradesmen. Common as such letters were, it was always a shock to him to find that the bland and obliging purveyor had handed him over to the iron hand of the solicitor. He was in no haste to open those letters, which would supply so many items in his schedule, perhaps, a few days later. Insolvency had been staring him in the face for a long time, and there was no alternative between death and the *Gazette.*

He finished his cigar, and then began to open his letters, deliberately, and as it were with a gloomy relish.

The first was from his hatter, piteously respectful; the second was from a solicitor in Bloomsbury, calling attention to an account of three years' standing with a Bond Street hairdresser; and the third and fourth were those uninforming yet significant documents, bill delivered, bearing date of the vanished years, and with a footnote requesting his earliest attention. Bill delivered. What value had he received for the sums demanded? A scarf, a pair of gloves, now and again, bought casually *pour passer le temps*, a set of shirts, perhaps, ordered to please the tradesman rather than from any need of his own, a dressing-jacket or two, and behold the man was clamouring for thirty-seven pounds odd shillings and pence!

He opened the fifth letter, which announced itself upon the envelope as from Lincoln's Inn Fields, and which, by the thickness of the paper and style of the address, was at least from a solicitor of position and respectability. Yet doubtless the tune was only the old tune, played upon a superior instrument. No, by Heaven! it was not the old formula.

"190, Lincoln's Inn Fields, W.C.

"*July* 17, 188—.

"SIR,

"If you are the same Mr. Gerard Hillersdon who in 1879 rescued an old gentleman from an approaching engine in the station at Nice, we have the honour to inform you that our late client, Mr. Milford, banker, of London, Marseilles, and Nice, has bequeathed the bulk of his large fortune to you, as residuary legatee. Our client was of somewhat eccentric habits, but we have no reason to doubt his disposing power at the date of the will, nor do we at present apprehend any attempt to dispute the said will, since Mr. Milford leaves no near relations.

"We shall be glad to see you, either here or at your own residence, at your earliest convenience.

"We have the honour to be, sir,
"Yours, etc., etc.,
"CRAFTON AND CRANBERRY."

Hillersdon turned the letter over and over in his hands, as if expecting that solid sheet of paper to change into a withered leaf under his touch; and then he burst into a laugh, as loud but not as joyous as Jermyn's gnome-like mirth.

"A trick," he cried, "a palpable trick, of the fate-reader, hypnotist, whatever he may please to call himself. A cruel jest, rather; to mock parched lips with the promise of the fountain; to exercise his fancy upon a destitute man. Well, I am not to be caught so easily. The churl whose remnant of life I saved at Nice was no wealthy banker, I'll be sworn, but some impecunious nobody who was soured by losses at Monte Carlo."

He looked at his watch. Half-past five. A good many hours must pass before it would be possible to discover the existence or non-existence of Crafton and Cranberry, and the authenticity of the letter on the table there, where he had flung it, a most respectable looking letter assuredly, if looks were anything to the purpose.

"Easy enough for him to get a lawyer's clerk to write on the firm's paper," he thought. Yet it were a hazardous thing to be done by any clerk, unless a discarded servant.

"How did he know?" mused Hillersdon. "It was after midnight I told him my adventure at Nice, and this letter was delivered by the last post at ten o'clock."

It was not impossible, though, for Jermyn to have heard of the old hunks at the Nice Station from Gilbert Watson, Hillersdon's friend, who had seen the end of the adventure, and heard the old man clamouring for his umbrella. Watson was a man about town, and might have been in contact with Jermyn, who was a season celebrity, and went everywhere.

Gerard threw himself dressed upon his bed, slept a troubled sleep in briefest intervals, and lay awake for the rest of the time between half-past five and half-past eight, when his servant Dodd—an old retainer, who had married and outlived the rectory nurse—brought him his early cup of tea and prepared his bath. He was dressed and out of doors by half-past nine, and a handsom took him to Lincoln's Inn Fields before the stroke of ten.

The office was evidently just opened, a most respectable office. An elderly clerk showed Mr. Hillersdon into a handsome waiting-room, where the newly-cut newspapers were systematically arranged upon a massive mahogany office table. Neither of the principals had arrived from their West End houses.

Gerard's impatience could not brook delay.

"Do you know anything about this letter?" he asked, showing the open document.

"I ought, sir, for it was I who wrote it," answered the grey-haired clerk.

"By way of a practical joke, I suppose," said Hillersdon grimly, "to oblige a facetious friend."

"Messrs. Crafton and Cranberry do not deal in practical jokes, sir," replied the clerk, with dignity. "I wrote that letter at Mr. Crafton's dictation, and if you are the Mr. Hillersdon there referred to it really ought to be a very pleasant letter for you to receive."

"Very pleasant, if I could venture to take it seriously."

"Why should you suspect a jest, sir, in so grave a matter, and coming to you from a firm of undoubted respectability?"

Hillersdon sighed impatiently, and passed his hand across his forehead with a troubled gesture. How did he know that this scene of the lawyer's office, the letter in his hand, the grey-haired, grave old clerk talking to him, were not part and parcel of some hypnotic vision, no more real than the figure of the girl at the sewing-machine which those same eyes of his had looked at last night. He stood irresolute, incredulous, silent, while the old clerk deferentially awaited his pleasure. The outer door opened as he stood there, and the measured footsteps of dignified middle-age crossed the hall.

"Mr. Crafton," said the clerk. "He will be able to assure you that there has been no jesting, sir."

Mr. Crafton entered, tall, broad, bulky, imposing, faultlessly dressed for his *rôle* of man of the world, not unaccustomed to society, and trustworthy family lawyer.

"Mr. Hillersdon, sir," said the clerk. "He has been disposed to think that the letter from the firm was a practical joke."

"I am hardly surprised at your incredulity, Mr. Hillersdon," said the solicitor, in an unctuous and comfortable voice, calculated to reassure desponding clients. "That letter may well take your breath away. A romance of real life, isn't it? A young man does a plucky thing on the spur of the moment, thinks no more about it, and some years after wakes up one morning to find himself—a very rich man," concluded Mr. Crafton, pulling up suddenly, as if he might have used a much bigger phrase. "Kindly step into my private room. You can bring us the copy of the will, Coxfield."

The clerk retired, and Mr. Crafton ushered his visitor into a large front office, as imposing as his own figure.

"Pray be seated, Mr. Hillersdon"—waving his hand towards a spacious arm chair. "Yes, the whole story comes within the region of romance; yet it is not the first time in testamentary history that a large fortune has been left to a stranger as a reward for some service barely acknowledged when it was rendered. Our late client, Mr. Milford, was a curious man. I'll warrant now he took very little trouble to show his gratitude when you had hazarded your life in his service."

"The only trouble he took was about his umbrella, which he was vociferously anxious to recover."

"So like him, dear old man. A character, my dear sir, a character. You wouldn't have given twenty shillings for the clothes he wore that day, I dare say—umbrella included."

"If clothes and umbrella had been on my premises, I would have given ten shillings to get them taken away."

"Precisely," exclaimed the lawyer, with his genial chuckle. "A very remarkable man. I doubt if he paid his tailor ten pound a year—or five. Yet a man of large benevolence, a man whose left hand knew not what his right hand gave. But now we have to come to the crucial question. Can you establish your identity with the Gerard Hillersdon whose name our late client took down from Mr. Gilbert Watson's dictation in the station at Nice."

"Very easily, I think. In the first place, I doubt if there is any other Gerard Hilderson in the directory, as the name Gerard comes from my mother's side of the house, and was not in the Hillersdon family before I was christened. Secondly, my friend Watson is now in London, and will readily identify me as the man about whose name your client inquired when I had left the platform. Thirdly, it would be easy, were further evidence needed, to establish the fact that I was residing at the Hôtel Mont Fleuri, Cannes, at that date, and that I went to Nice on the first day of the Carnival."

"I do not think there will be any difficulty as to identity," Mr. Crafton replied suavely. "Your present address is the same as that which Mr. Watson gave our lamented client, and he further described you as the son of the Rector of Helmsleigh, Devon, a detail no doubt elicited by Mr. Milford's inquiry. Here is a copy of the will. You would like to hear it, perhaps," suggested Mr. Crafton, as the clerk entered and laid the document before him.

"Very much."

Mr. Crafton read in a clear, distinct voice and with great unction. The will was dated six months previously, and was made at Nice. It opened with a long list of legacies, to old servants, to the clerks in three banking-houses, in London, Marseilles, Nice, to numerous charities, to Mr. Crafton and his partner, Mr. Cranberry. Hillersdon sat aghast as he heard thousands and fives and tens of thousands disposed of in this manner. To the Hospital for Children, Great Ormond Street, ten thousand; five thousand to St. George's Hospital; a thousand each to ten Orphanages; five thousand to a Convalescent Hospital; three thousand to an Asylum for the Blind. Would there be anything left for him after this lavish distribution? The passage in the will which concerned himself came at last, and was simple and brief. "Finally, I bequeath the residue of my estate, real and personal, to Gerard Hillersdon, younger son of the Rev. Edward Hillersdon, Rector of Helmsleigh, Devon, in recognition of his generosity and courage in saving my life at the hazard of his own in the railway station in this place, on the 14th of February, 1879, and I appoint James Crafton, Solicitor, of 190, Lincoln's Inn Fields, sole executor of this my will."

"It is a noble reward for an action to which I never attached the slightest importance," said Hillersdon, pale to the lips with suppressed emotion. "I saw a young man at Newton Abbot do almost as much to save a dog, which was running up and down the line, scared by the porters who shouted at him. That young man jumped down upon the metals and picked up the dog in front of the engine—somebody else's cur, not even his own property. And I—because in common humanity I plucked an old man from instant death—yes, it was a near shave, I know, and might have ended badly for me—but it was only instinctive humanity, after all—I am left a fortune. It is a fortune, I suppose?"

"Yes, Mr. Hillersdon, a large fortune—something over two millions, consisting of lands, houses, consols, bank stock, railway and other shares, together with the sole interest in the firm of Milford Brothers, Bankers, of London, Marseilles, and Nice.

Hillersdon broke down utterly at this point. He turned his face from the spectators, principal and clerk, and fought hard with himself to keep back a burst of hysterical tears mixed with hysterical laughter.

"It is too ridiculous," he said, when he had recovered his speech. "Yesterday I was in the depths of despair. It is real, isn't it?" he asked piteously. "You are not fooling me—you are real men, you two, not shadows? This is not a dream?"

He struck his hand on the table so heavily as to produce severe pain.

"*That* is real, at any rate," he muttered.

Solicitor and clerk looked at each other dubiously. They were afraid their news had been too sudden, and that it had turned this possible client's head.

"Advance me some money," asked Hillersdon abruptly. "Come, Mr. Crafton, give me your cheque for a good round sum, and when I have cashed that cheque I shall begin to believe in Mr. Milford's will and in your good faith. I am up to my eyes in debt, and it will be a new sensation to be able to pay the most pressing of my creditors."

Mr. Crafton had his cheque-book open and his pen dipped in the ink before this potential client had done speaking.

"How much would you like?" he asked.

"How much? Would five hundred be too large an advance?"

"A thousand, if you like."

"No, five hundred will do. You will act as my solicitors, I suppose—carry through this business for me. I am as ignorant of the law as the sheep who provide your parchment. I shall have to prove the will I suppose. I haven't the faintest notion what that means."

"That will be my duty as executor. Our firm will settle all details for you, if you have no family lawyer whom you would prefer to employ."

"I don't care a rap for our family lawyer. He has never done anything to endear himself to me. If you were good enough for Mr. Milford—my benefactor—you are good enough for me. And now I'll go and cash this cheque."

"Will you allow our messenger to do that for you?"

"Thanks, no. I like the sensation of a bank counter when I have money to receive. How will I have it? A hundred in tens, the rest in fifties. How I shall astonish my worthy landlord! Good day. Send for me when you want me to execute deeds, or sign documents."

He went out on to the sunny pavement where the hansom was waiting for him; went out with a step so light he was scarcely conscious of the pavement under his feet. Even yet he could scarcely divest himself of the idea that he was the sport of dreams, or of some strange jugglery worked by the man with the light-blue eyes and the uncanny laugh.

He drove to the Union Bank, in Chancery Lane, cashed his cheque, and then drove about the West End, to tailor, hatter, hairdresser, hosier, paying fifties on account. He had only a hundred and fifty left when he got back to his lodgings, and out of this he paid his landlord a hundred. The remaining fifty was for pocket-money. It was such a new sensation to have satisfied his creditors, that he felt as if he were made of air. He was convinced of the fact now. This thing was a reality. Fortune had turned her wheel—turned it so completely that he who had been at the bottom was now at the top. What would his own people think of this wonder that had befallen him? A millionaire! he, the thriftless son, who had until now been only a burden and a care to father and mother. He would not write. He would run down to Devonshire in a day or two, and tell them this wonderful story with his own lips.

And but for Justin Jermyn's interference he would have shot himself last night, and would have been lying stark and stiff this morning. Yet, no, the letter was delivered at his lodgings last night, at ten o'clock. Fortune had turned her wheel. The tidings of her bounty were waiting for him while he was fooling in the Fate-reader's room, the sport ot a shallow trickster.

"And yet he seemed to know," thought Hillersdon; "he hinted at a change of fortune—he led me on to talk of the old man at Nice."

He felt a sudden desire to see Jermyn, to tell him what had happened; to talk over his monstrous luck; to see what effect the news would have upon the Fate-reader. There were other people he wanted to see—most especially Edith Champion—but the desire to see Jermyn was the strongest of all. He got into a cab, and told the man to drive to Holborn.

He hadn't the remotest idea whereabouts in Holborn that old Inn was situated, or whether in any adjacent thoroughfare. He dismissed his cab at Warwick Court, and went about on foot, in and out of dingy old gateways, and in all the "dusty purlieus of the law," as existent in the neighbourhood of Holborn; but nowhere could he find gate-house, or semi-deserted inn that in any wise resembled the place to which Jermyn had taken him last night.

After nearly two hours of ineffectual exploration he gave up the search, and drove to the West End, where, at the Sensorium, a smart dilettante club of which he was a member, he hoped to hear Jermyn's address. It was tea-time, and there were a good many men in the reading-room and adjacent smoke-room, and among them several of Hillersdon's friends.

He sat down in the midst of a little knot of acquaintances, and ordered his tea at a table where he was welcomed with marked cordiality—welcomed by men who knew not that they were welcoming a millionaire.

"You know everything that's going on, Vane," he said, to one of these; "so of course you know Jermyn, the Fate-reader?"

"Intimately. It was I who secured him for Lady Fridoline yesterday. He doesn't, as a rule, show himself at the common or garden-party, but he went to Fridoline House to oblige me."

"Will you tell me where he lives?"

"Nowhere. He is much too clever to put an address on his card, like a commonplace individual. He is to be heard of here, or at the Heptachord. He is a member of both clubs, though he rarely shows at either—but as to an address, a vulgar lodging-house address, like yours or mine. *Pas si bête!* If he put anything on his card it would be Styx, or Orcus."

"My dear fellow, I supped with him last night at his chambers."

"Then you know where they are?"

"That is exactly what I do not know. Jermyn insisted upon my going to supper with him last night after the opera. We walked from Covent Garden to his chambers. We were talking all the time, and except that we passed through Queen Street and Lincoln's Inn Fields, I haven't an idea as to what direction we took, or where the curious shabby old Inn is situated."

Youth's frank laughter greeted this avowal.

"Then all I can say, my dear Hillersdon, is that you were rather more 'on' than a man generally is when he leaves the opera. You were very lucky to get out of Bow Street."

"Would you be surprised to hear that I had taken nothing stronger than Salutaris at dinner, and nothing whatever after dinner? No, wine had nothing to do with my mental condition. Jermyn and I were talking. I was in a somewhat dreamy mood, and allowed myself to be piloted without taking any notice of the way we went. I will own that when I left him at four o'clock this morning my head was not quite so clear, and London might be Bagdad for all I know of the streets and squares through which I made tracks for Piccadilly."

"So Jermyn entertains, does he?" exclaimed Roger Larose, the æsthetic architect, and elegant idler, a man who always looked as if he had just stepped out of one of Marcus Stone's pictures; "this must be inquired into. He has never entertained me. Was your drunkenness a pleasant intoxication? Was his wine irreproachable?"

"More, it was irresistible. He gave me some old Madeira that was like melted gold, and his champagne had the cool freshness of a wild rose, an aroma as delicate as the perfume of the flower."

"I believe he hypnotised you, and that there was nothing; or perhaps bread and cheese and porter," said Larose. "Where are you going, and what are you going to do this afternoon? I've some Hurlingham vouchers in my pocket. Shall we go and see the polo match, or shoot pigeons, and dine on the lawn?"

A thrill went through Hillersdon's heart at the thought that yesterday, had Larose made such a proposition, he would have been obliged to decline, with whatever excuse he might invent on the spur of the moment. Yesterday the half-guinea gate-money and the risk of being let in to pay for the dinner would have made Hurlingham forbidden ground. To-day he was eager to taste the new joy of spending money without one agonising scruple, one pang of remorse for extravagance that meant dishonesty.

"I am going to call on some ladies," he said. "If you can give me a couple of ladies' tickets and one for myself, I will meet you in time for dinner."

"Do I know the ladies? Is Mrs. Champion one of them?"

"Yes."

"Delightful—a *parti carré*. It is going to be a piping night. We will dine on the lawn, hear the chimes at midnight, stealing softly along the river from the great bell at Westminster. We will fancy we see fireflies and that Fulham is Tuscany—fancy ourselves in the Cascine Gardens, which are not half so pretty as Hurlingham or Barn Elms, when all is said and done. Get along with you, Hillersdon. In spite of your debauch you are looking as happy as if you had just had a fortune left you."

Gerard Hillersdon laughed somewhat hysterically, and hurried out of the club. He had not the courage to tell any one what had happened to him—not yet. That word hypnotism frightened him, even after this seemingly substantial evidence of his good luck. The lawyer's office, the bank, the notes, and tradesmen's receipts! Might not all these be part and parcel of the same hypnotic trance. He pulled a bundle of receipted accounts out of his pocket. Yes, those were real, or as real as anything can be to a man who dares not be sure that he is not dreaming.

He drove to Hertford Street. Mrs. Champion was at home, and alone. Her carriage was at the door ready to take her to the Park. Mrs. Gresham was again engaged in the cause of the Anglican Orphans, serving tea and cake to the shilling people on the second day of the bazaar at the Riding School, and was to be called for at six o'clock.

Mrs. Champion was sitting in a darkened drawing-room, in an atmosphere of tropical flowers, dressed in India muslin, the room and the lady alike suggestive of coolness and repose after the glare and the traffic of the streets. She looked up from her book with a start of surprise at hearing Hillersdon's name.

"I thought you were half way to Germany by this time," she said, evidently not ill-pleased at his return, as it were a bird fluttering back to the open door of his cage, "but perhaps you missed your train and are going to-morrow."

"No, Mrs. Champion, I changed my mind, and I am not going at all."

"How nice!" she said sweetly, laying aside her book and preparing to be confidential. "Was it to please me you stayed?"

He made up his mind that he must tell her. His mouth grew dry and hot at the very thought; but he could not keep the knowledge of his altered fate from this woman who had been, who was still, perhaps, the other half of his soul.

"For once in my life," he said quietly, "or let me say for once since I first met you—your wish was not my only law. Something has happened to me—to change my life altogether since yesterday."

That hoarse broken voice and the intensity of his look scared her. Imagination set off at a gallop.

"You are engaged to be married," she cried, rising suddenly out of her low chair, straight as a dart, and deadly pale. "These things always end so. You have been loyal to me for years, and now you have grown weary, and you want a wife—Elaine instead of Guinevere—and you meant to run away to Germany and break the thing to me in a letter—and then you changed your mind and took courage to tell me with your own false lips."

This burst of passion—her white face and flashing eyes—were a revelation to him. He had thought her as calm and cold as a snow figure that children build in a garden; and behold he had been playing with fire all this time.

He was standing by her side in an instant, holding her icy hands, drawing her nearer to him.

"Edith, Edith, can you think so poorly of me? Engaged! Why, you know there is no other woman I care for—have ever cared for. Engaged, in a day, in an hour! Have I not given you my life? What more could I do?"

"You are not! Oh, thank God. I could bear anything but that."

"And yet—and yet—you hold me at arm's length," he said fondly, with his lips near hers.

She was the snow figure again in a moment, standing before him in her matronly dignity, cold, proud, unapproachable.

"I was foolish to put myself in a passion," she said, "and, after all, whenever you want to marry I shall have no right to hinder you. Only I should like to know your plans in good time, so that I may accustom myself to the idea. The horses have been at the door ever so long, and that hard working Rosa will be waiting for me. Will you come for a drive round the Park?"

"I shall be charmed; but I want you and Mrs. Gresham to dine with me at Hurlingham. We can go on there when you have done your Park."

"I don't care a straw for the Park. Let us go straight to Hurlingham and see the Polo. But I am so carelessly dressed; shall I do, do you think, or must I put on a smarter gown?"

She stood up before him in a cloud of muslin and lace, a gown so flowing and graceful in its draping over bust and hips, that it might have been a cloud of spray clothing a nymph at a fountain.

"Your careless costume is simply perfection. Only be sure and bring a warm wrap, for we may be sitting late upon the lawn."

She touched a spring bell, and her maid appeared with a white Gainsborough hat and a pair of long suede gloves. Wraps were sent for, the butler was informed that his mistress would not dine at home, and the barouche drove off with Gerard on the front seat, opposite Mrs. Champion.

"What can have happened to change your life, if you are not going to be married?" she asked, as they turned into Piccadilly. "You mystify me. I hope it is nothing bad—no misfortune to any of your people?"

"No, it is something distinctly good. An eccentric old man, whom I was once so fortunate as to oblige, has left me the bulk of his fortune."

"I congratulate you," she said; but there was a troubled look in her face that surprised him.

Surely she ought to be glad.

"Does that mean that you are a rich man?" she asked, after a pause.

"Yes, I am a rich man."

"How rich?"

"As rich as anybody need care to be. I am told that the fortune left me is something over two millions."

"Two millions of francs?"

"Two millions sterling."

"Good heavens! Why, Champion is a pauper compared with you. This is too absurd!"

"It does savour of the ridiculous, I admit," said Hillersdon, somewhat piqued by her manner of treating the subject. "Poverty was my *métier* no doubt. I was born to be a hanger-on upon the great world; to taste its pleasures by the favour of other people; to visit in smart houses on sufferance; to live in a shabby lodging and find my warmest welcome at a club."

"Two millions!" repeated Edith. "I am sure James has not as much. Two millions! You will have to marry now, of course."

"Have to! Why should I be constrained to marry just when I have the means of enjoying a bachelor's life?"

"You will be made to marry, I tell you," she answered impatiently. "You don't know what women are who have daughters to marry. You don't know what girls are—hardened worldly girls, in their third or fourth season—who want to secure a rich husband. You can't possibly estimate the influences that will be brought to bear upon you. All the spinsters in London will be at your feet."

"For the sake of my two millions. Are women so mercenary?"

"They are obliged to be," answered Edith Champion. "We live in an age in which poverty is utterly intolerable. One must be rich or miserable. Do you think I would have consented to marry Mr. Champion, in spite of all the pressure my family put upon me, if I had been brave enough to bear poverty with you? No, to be well born means the necessity of wealth. One's birthright is to belong to the smart world, and to be poor in that world is to be a social martyr. I have often envied the women born at Camberwell or Islington; the women who go to the butcher's to buy the dinner, and who wear cotton gloves."

"Yes, there is an independence in those lower depths. One can be poor and unashamed, if one belongs to the proletariat. But be assured, my dear Mrs. Champion, that I shall not fall a victim to a manœuvring mother or an enterprising young lady. I shall know how to enjoy wealth and freedom."

Edith sighed. Would not the independence of unlimited wealth tempt her slave to throw off the yoke? Could he ever be again—he the millionaire—what he had been to her? Would he be content to dance attendance upon her, to be at her beck and call, an inevitable guest at all her parties, to hand tea-cups at her afternoons when he was perhaps the only man present, to fetch and carry for her, find her the newest books in French and German, taste them for her before she took the trouble to read them, keep her posted in the gossip of the clubs, so far as such gossip was fitting for a lady to know? For the last three years he had been her second self, had supplemented her intellect and amused her leisure. But would he be content to play the satellite now that wealth would give him power to be a planet, with moons and satellites of his own?

"He will marry," she told herself. "There is no use talking about it. It was easy to keep him in leading-strings while he was too poor to be worth any marriageable girl's attention. But now he will be forced into marriage. The thing is inevitable."

The carriage stopped at the Riding School, and the footman went in to look for Rosa Gresham, who came tripping out presently, airily dressed as befitted the summer solstice, and somewhat purple as to complexion.

"We are going to take you to dine at Hurlingham," said Edith.

"How awfully good of you! I am dead beat. The shilling people were too horrid—staring, and pushing, and squabbling for their right change, and gobbling cake in a revolting manner. I don't think our stall can have cleared its expenses. How well you are looking this afternoon, Mr. Hillersdon! and yesterday I thought you looked dreadful, so hollow under the eyes, so pale and haggard."

"I thought I was going away, to part company with all I cared for," said Gerard.

"And now you are not going?"

"No," Edith answered, with a laugh which was not altogether joyous. "He may well look different. Though form and feature are unchanged he is a different man. Rosa, you are sitting opposite a millionaire."

"Heavens! Do you really mean it, or is it a joke?"

"I hope and believe that it is serious. I have the assurance of a dry-as-dust solicitor that there is as much money in the world, and that it belongs to me. And I cannot even thank the man who gave it me, for the hand that gave it is in the dust."

"And to think that you never came to our Bazaar, never gave one thought, in the midst of your prosperity, to the Anglican Orphans!" exclaimed Rosa.

CHAPTER V.

LIFE UPON NEW LINES.

The nightingales were gone, but the roses were left, and it was pleasant to sit on the lawn and hear the plash of the tide, and see the stars come slowly out, large and red in the smoke-tainted atmosphere, above the tufted elms of Hurlingham. Roger Larose talked his best in that dim light, and Gerard, who had been silent and moody at the little dinner in Hertford Street yesterday, was to-night as joyous as the thrushes that were singing their evening hymn in the cool dusk of deserted shrubberies. And all the difference—the difference between despair and gladness, between gloom and mirth, between eager delight in life and dull disgust, had been brought about by the most sordid factor in the sum of man's existence—filthy lucre.

No matter the cause when the effect was so enchanting. Gerard's elation communicated itself to his companions. More champagne was consumed at that little table in the garden than at any other party of four in the club, and yet the house was crowded with diners, and there were other groups scattered here and there, banqueting under the roof of heaven. Lightest talk and gladdest laughter beguiled the hours till nearly midnight, when Mrs. Gresham remembered an early celebration at a ritualistic temple in Holborn, and entreated to be taken home at once, so that she might secure certain hours of pious seclusion before dawn.

Gerard had requested that no word of his altered fortunes should be spoken before Roger Larose. Roger and the rest of the world would hear all about his good luck in due course; but he shrank from the idea of endless congratulations, very few of them cordial and disinterested. Time enough when the inexorable *Illustrated London News* had acquainted society with the particulars of Mr. Milford's will.

The two women behaved with discretion, and although Larose wondered a little at the superb indifference with which Hillersdon paid for the dinner, and left the change of a ten-pound note to the waiter, knowing that of late his friend had suffered from youth's common malady of impecuniousness, he ascribed this freedom only to some windfall which afforded temporary relief.

On their way to the carriage Mrs. Gresham contrived to get Hillersdon all to herself, while Larose and Mrs. Champion walked in advance of them.

"Dear Mr. Hillersdon, a fortune such as yours is a vast responsibility for a Christian," she began solemnly.

"I haven't looked at it in that light, Mrs. Gresham; but I own that it will take a good deal of spending."

"It will, and the grand thing will be to secure good results for your outlay. There is one good work I should like to introduce to your notice before you are beset by appeals from strangers. The chief desire of my husband's heart, and I may say also of mine, is to enlarge our Parish Church, now altogether unarchitectural and inadequate to the wants of the increased congregation which his eloquence and strength of character have attracted. In the late incumbent's time the church used to be half empty, and mice ran about in the gallery. We want to do away with that horrid gallery, build a transept which would absorb the existing chancel, and add a new and finer chancel. It will cost a great deal of money, but we have many promises of help if any benefactor would give a large donation—say a thousand guineas—to start the fund in a substantial manner."

"My dear Mrs. Gresham, you forget that I am a parson's son. Dog doesn't eat dog, you know. I have no doubt my father's church needs enlargement. I know it has a pervading mouldiness which calls for restoration. I must think of him before I start your fund."

"If you have not yet learnt how to spend your fortune, you certainly seem to know how to take care of it, Mr. Hillersdon," said Mrs. Gresham, with some asperity; and then recovering herself, she continued airily, "It was rather too bad of me perhaps to plague you so soon, but in the cause of the Church one must ask in season and out of season."

They went through the house and waited in the vestibule while the carriage was brought to the door, and they all went back to town together in the barouche, and wound up with an after-midnight cup of tea in Mrs. Champion's drawing-room, a labyrinth of luxurious chairs, and palms, and Indian screens, and many-shaped tables, loaded with bric-à-brac of the costliest kind, glimmering in the tempered light of amber-shaded lamps.

"I like the French custom of midnight tea," said Larose. "It stretches the thread of life and shortens the night of the brain."

Mrs. Gresham slipped away with ostentatious stealthiness after a hasty cup of tea; but the others sat late, beguiled by the reposeful atmosphere—they three alone in the spacious room, with its perfume of tea-roses and shadow of dark fan-shaped leaves. Edith Champion was not a person of many accomplishments. She neither played nor sang, she neither painted pictures nor wrote verses, preferring that such things should be done for her by those who made it the business of their lives to do them well. But she was past-mistress of the decorative art, and there were few women in London or Paris who could approach her in the arrangement of a drawing-room.

"My drawing-room is part of myself," she said; "it reflects every shade of my character, and changes as I change."

It was past one o'clock when Hillersdon and Larose left Hertford Street. Piccadilly and the Park looked almost romantic in the moonlight. That cup of strong Indian tea had worked the usual effect of such potions, and both men were disinclined to go home to the uninviting seclusion of a lodging-house bedroom.

"Shall we go to the Petunia?" asked Larose, suggesting one of those after-midnight clubs where the society is decidedly mixed, and where the champagne costs twice as much as at the Carlton or the Reform."

"I detest the Petunia."

"The Small Hours, then? They are giving really good music now, and we can get devilled bones or a lobster to our supper."

"Thanks, no; I have had enough of society—even yours, which is always delightful. I am going for a long walk."

"That is a safe way of getting rid of me," answered Larose. "I never walk a furlong further than I am absolutely obliged. Hansom."

His lodgings were in George Street, Hanover Square, hardly a profitable shilling's worth, but it was not in Larose's temperament to consider shillings, until he had spent his last. There were intervals when he was without even the indispensable shilling for a hansom.

"And a good thing, too," said one of his friends, on hearing that hansoms were impossible, "for then you are obliged to walk."

"Obliged!" cried Larose. "Marry! what should oblige me to do anything I don't like doing? No lesser person than 'the blind fury with the abhorred shears.' When I can't afford cabs I take to my bed, lie a-bed all day reading Ruskin, or dreaming of Coptic churches and Moorish interiors, and get up at dusk and make a ground plan or sketch a façade, in my dressing-gown, while the housemaid arranges my room. In these intervals I live upon biscuits and soda-water, like Byron, and I emerge from my retirement a renovated and rejuvenated man. Thus do I make necessity my nurse, and profit by propulsion," concluded the architect, who had a knack of sham quotation.

Hillersdon was glad to see the cab go swinging round into Bond Street with his vivacious friend. He wanted to be alone. He had taken a curious fancy into his head, which was to renew his search for the curious old Inn where he had supped last night. He fancied that he might be able to hit upon the place if he approached it under the same conditions of darkness and the comparative solitude of night. He had failed utterly to find the old gate-way in the glare of day; yet the fabric must exist somewhere within narrow limits. The whole thing—the house to which he was taken—the room in which he sat—the wine he drank—could not be a vision of the night. Granted that the face of the girl was a hallucination put upon him by a clever mesmerist, other things must have been real. He could not have wandered in the streets of London for three or four hours in a mesmeric trance, full of vain imaginings. No, his memory of every detail, of every word they two had spoken, was too distinct to be only the memory of a dream.

He walked to Bow Street, and from Bow Street went in the direction in which he had gone on the night before with Justin

Jermyn. After he left Lincoln's Inn Fields he tried to abstract his mind and to walk without thought of the way he was going, hoping that instinct might direct his steps in the way they had gone last night, the same instinct by which a horse who has travelled a road only once will make every turn accurately upon a second journey.

Instinct gave him no help. He wandered up and down Holborn, he explored the side streets that lie right and left of Gray's Inn Lane, he threaded narrow courts and emerged into Hatton Garden, he went back to the Lane and hugged the dingy wall of Verulam Buildings; but nowhere did he see gate-house or archway that bore the faintest resemblance to the gate-house beneath which he passed last night. He began to think that he had been verily upon enchanted ground, and that the champagne he had drunk with Justin Jermyn was akin to that juice of the grape which Mephistopheles drew from an augur hole in a wooden table. There was devilry in last night's business somewhere or somehow.

He went back to his lodgings mystified and dispirited. He forgot that he was a millionaire, and over the scene of life there crept once again that dreary neutral hue which it had worn when he contemplated making a sudden irrevocable exit from the stage. It was three o'clock before he got to Church Court, half-past three before he flung himself wearily upon his jingling brazen bed.

"I must move into better rooms on Monday," he said to himself, "and I must think about getting a house of my own. What is the use of wealth if one doesn't enjoy it?"

There was very little enjoyment in him this summer morning, when the clear bright light stole into his room, and accentuated the shabbiness of the well-worn furniture, the hideous Philistinism of the maple wardrobe, with its Corinthian columns and tall strip of looking-glass, glass in which he had critically surveyed his dress suit the other evening, wondering how long it would hold out against the want of confidence among west-end tailors. He could have as many dress suits as he liked now, and could pay as much as the most egregious tailor cared to demand. He could live where he liked, start his house and his stable on a footing worthy of Nero or Domitian. He could do what he liked with his life, and the world would call it good, would wink at his delinquencies and flatter his follies. All that the world has of good lay in the hollow of his hand, for are not all the world's good things for sale to the highest bidder? He reflected upon this wondrous change in his fortunes, and yet in this morning hour of solitude and silence the consciousness of illimitable wealth could not bring him happiness.

There had always been a vein of superstition in his nature, perhaps; or superstitious fears would scarcely have troubled him in the midst of his prosperity. His double attempt to find Jermyn's chambers and his double failure had disconcerted him more than such a thing should have done. The adventure gave a suggestion of *diablerie* to his whole history since the moment when Jermyn read his secret design in the library at Fridoline House.

He could not sleep, so he took down the "Peau de Chagrin" from the bookcase which held his limited library, composed of only that which he held choicest in literature. One could have read the bent of his mind by looking at the titles of those thirty or forty books. Goethe's Faust, Heine's poetry and prose, Alfred de Musset, Owen Meredith, Villon, Gautier, Balzac, Baudelaire, Richepin; the literature of despair.

He read how when the lawyer brought Raphael the news of his fortune, his first thought was to take the "Peau de Chagrin" from his pocket and measure it against the tracing he had made upon a table-napkin the night before.

The skin had shrunk perceptibly. So much had gone from his life in the emotions of a single night of riot, in the shock of a sudden change in his fortunes.

"An allegory," mused Hillersdon. "My life has been wasting rapidly since the night before last. I have been living faster, two heart-throbs for one."

He breakfasted early after two or three hours of broken sleep, and dawdled over his breakfast, taking up one volume after another with a painful inability to fix his mind upon any subject, until the inexorable church bells began their clangour close at hand, and made all thought impossible.

Then only did he remember that it was Sunday morning. He changed his coat hurriedly, brushed his hat, and set out for that fashionable temple in which Edith Champion was wont to hear the eloquent sermons of a "delicate, dilletante, white-handed priest," in an atmosphere heavy with Ess bouquet, and the warm breath of closely-packed humanity.

The choir was chanting the "Te Deum" when he went in, and secured one of the last rush-bottomed chairs available in the crowded nave. His night wanderings had fatigued him more than he knew, and he slept profoundly through one of the choicest discourses of the season, and was not a little embarrassed when Mrs. Champion and Mrs. Gresham insisted upon discussing every point the preacher had made. Happily, both ladies were too eager to state their own opinions to discover his ignorance, or to guess that for him that thrilling sermon had been as the booming of a bumble bee in the heart of an over-blown rose—a sound of soothing and pleasantness.

"He goes to the Riviera every winter," said Mrs. Champion, slipping from the sermon to the preacher; "he is more popular there than in London. You should hear his thrilling denunciation of Monte Carlo, and his awful warnings to the people who go there. There is hardly standing room in any church where he preaches."

Hillersdon walked in the Park with the two ladies, patiently enduring that customary church parade which always bored him, even in Edith Champion's company, and even although his pride was stimulated by being seen in attendance upon one of the handsomest women in London.

The Park looked lovely in the summer noontide, the people were smart, well-dressed, admirable; but the park and the people were the same as last year, and they would be the same next year—the same and always the same.

> "It is the constant revolution stale
> And tasteless, of the same repeated joys,
> That palls and satiates, and makes languid life
> A pedlar's pack, that bows the bearer down."

He dined with Mrs. Champion, and went to a musical party with her, and that Sunday seemed to him one of the longest he had ever spent, longer even than the Sabbath days of his boyhood, when he was allowed to read only good books, and forbidden all transactions with rat-catchers and ferrets.

He was glad when he had handed Mrs. Champion to her carriage under an awning in Grosvenor Place, glad to go back to his bachelor loneliness, and impatient of Monday morning. He was up betimes, and hurried off to Lincoln's Inn Fields as soon as it was reasonable to expect Mr. Crafton at his office. He wanted again to assure himself that Ebenezer Milford's fortune was a reality, and not a dream.

The solicitor received him with unimpaired graciousness, and was ready with offers of assistance in any plans of his client. All that had to be done about the inheritance was in progress; but as all processes of law are lengthy it would be some little time before Mr. Hillersdon would be in actual possession of his wealth.

"The succession duties will be very heavy," said Crafton, shaking his head; and Hillersdon felt that in this respect his was a hard case.

"Have you communicated with your friend, Mr. Watson?" the lawyer asked presently.

"No, I forgot to do that."

"It would be as well that you should look him up at once, and test his memory of the occurrence in the railway station," suggested Crafton. "His evidence would be very useful in the—most unlikely—contingency of any attempt to upset the will."

This remark had the effect of a douche of cold water upon Hillersdon.

"You don't apprehend——" he faltered.

"No, I have not the slightest apprehension. Poor old Milford was an isolated being. If he had any relations I never heard of them. But, as a precautionary measure, I advise you to see your friend."

"Yes, yes, I will go to him at once," said Hillersdon feverishly, getting up and making for the door.

"There is no need for hurry. Is there nothing that I can do for you?"

"Nothing. I have been thinking of changing my lodgings—but that can stand over for a few days. I must see Watson—and then I must go down to the country to see my own people. It wouldn't do for them to hear of my good luck from any one else. I may tell them, I suppose? I am not likely to find myself thrust out of this inheritance after a few weeks' possession? I am not going to be a kind of Lady Jane Grey among legatees?"

"No, no; there is really no danger. The will is a splendid will. It would be very difficult for any one to attack it, even the nearest blood relation. I have not the slightest fear."

"Give me your cheque for another five hundred, by way of backing your opinion," said Hillersdon, still feverishly, and with a shade of fretfulness.

He was irritated by the mere suggestion that a will is an instrument that may be impeached.

"With pleasure," replied Mr. Crafton, ready with his cheque book; "shall I make it a thousand?"

"No, no, a monkey will do. I really don't want the money, only I like to see you part with it freely. Thanks; good day."

His hansom was waiting for him. He told the man to drive to the Albany, where he might utilise his call upon Watson by making inquiries about any eligible rooms.

It was early in the day, and Watson was lingering over his breakfast, which had been lengthened out by the skimming of half-a-dozen morning papers. He had not seen Hillersdon for some time, and welcomed him with frank cordiality.

"What have you been doing with yourself all this time?" he asked, as he rang for fresh coffee. "You've been moving in Mrs. Champion's charmed circle, I suppose, and as her orbit ain't mine we don't often meet, and now we do meet I can't compliment you on your appearance. You are looking uncommonly seedy."

"I have been sleeping badly for the last few nights. That's my only ailment. Do you remember that evening at Nice when you went to the station with me after the battle of flowers?"

"And when you picked a churlish old fellow from the front of an advancing engine, and to all intents and purposes saved his life? Of course I remember. A curious old man, that. I believe he means to leave you a legacy of some kind. Nineteen pounds nineteen, perhaps, to buy a mourning ring. He was monstrously particular in his inquiries about—your name and parentage, and usual place of abode. He walked half the length of the Avenue de la Gare with me, and he was very much troubled in mind about his umbrella."

"Did he tell you his name?"

"He gave me his card at parting, but I lost the card and forgot the name."

"And you really believe that I saved his life?"

"I don't think there's the slightest doubt about it. The thing was as near as a toucher. I expected to see you killed in an unsuccessful attempt to save him."

"And you would put as much as that in an affidavit, or say as much in the witness-box?"

"In a dozen affidavits, or in a dozen witness-boxes. But why these questions?"

Hillersdon told him the motive, and the fortune that was at stake.

"Then the legacy comes to two millions?" cried Watson. "By Jove, you are a lucky fellow, and upon my honour you deserve it! You hazarded your life, and what can any man do more than that, and for an unknown traveller. The good Samaritan goes down to posterity on the strength of a little kindly feeling and twopence. You did a great deal more than the Samaritan. Why cannot I pluck a shabby Crœsus out of the iron way, or rescue a millionaire from drowning? Why should this one lucky chance come your way and not mine? You were only ten paces in advance of me when the crucial moment came. Well, I won't grumble at your good fortune. After all, the accession of one's bosom friend to millions makes one's self no poorer. Yet there is always a feeling of being reduced to abject poverty when a friend tumbles into unexpected wealth. It will take me months to reconcile myself to the idea of you as a millionaire. And now what are you going to do with your life?"

"Enjoy it if I can, having the means of enjoyment given me."

"All that money can do you can do," said Watson, with a philosophic air. "You will now have the opportunity of testing the power of wealth, its limitations, its strictly finite nature."

"I will not moan if I find there are some things gold cannot buy," said Hillersdon. "There are so many things it can buy which I have been wanting all my life."

"Well, you are a lucky fellow, and you deserve your luck, because you did a plucky thing without thought or fear of consequences. If you had paused to consider your own peril that old man would have been smashed."

The servant came in with the coffee, a welcome interruption to Hillersdon, who was tired of being complimented on his pluck. His early breakfast had been only a cup of tea, and he was not sorry to begin again with Watson, who prided himself upon living well, and was a connoisseur of perigord pies and York hams, and took infinite pains to get the freshest eggs and best butter that London could supply.

"Well, you are going to enjoy your life; that is understood. Imprimis, I suppose you will marry?" said Watson, cheerily.

"I told you, I meant to enjoy my life," answered Hillersdon. "The first element of happiness is liberty. And you suggest that I should start by surrendering it to a wife?"

"Oh, that's all bosh. A man with a big income does not lose his freedom by taking a wife. In a millionaire's household a wife is only an ornament. She has neither control nor ascendancy over his existence. You remember what Beckford said of the Venetian nobility at the close of the eighteenth century. Every great man in that enchanting city had his secret tabernacle—a snug little nest in the labyrinth of narrow streets, or in some shadowy bend of a rio, known only to himself and his intimates, where he might live his own life, while his ostensible existence as Grand Seigneur was conducted with regal pomp and publicity in his palace on the Grand Canal. Do you suppose the Venetian nobleman of that golden age was governed by his wife?" *Pas si bête.*"

"I shall never marry till I can marry the woman I love," answered Hillersdon.

Watson shrugged his shoulders significantly, and went on with his breakfast. He knew all about Mrs. Champion, and that romantic attachment which had been going on for years, and which seemed as hopeless and almost as unprofitable upon Gerard Hillersdon's side as Don Quixote's worship of Dulcinea del Toboso. Watson, who was strictly practical, could not enter into the mind of a man who sacrificed his life for a virtuous woman. He could understand the other thing—life and honour, fortune and good name, flung at the feet of Venus Pandemos. He had seen too much of the influence of base women and ignoble love to doubt the power of evil over the hearts of men. It was the namby-pamby devotion, this lap-dog love, the desire of the moth for the star, in which he could not believe.

Hillersdon left him in time to catch the Exeter express at Waterloo. He had made up his mind that he must no longer keep his own people in ignorance of the change in his fortunes. He had given the hard-worked father and the long-suffering mother too much trouble in the past, and now the hour of compensation must be no longer delayed. Yes, his father's church should be restored, and the dear old tumble-down Rectory renovated from garret to cellar without injury to its tumble-downness, which was of all things beautiful—a long, low house, with bow windows bellying out unexpectedly; a house so smothered with banksia roses, myrtle, flowering ash, and wistaria that it was not easy to discover whether its walls were brick or stone, rough-cast or cob.

It was a relief to Gerard Hillersdon to turn his back upon London, to feel that his face was set towards green pastures and summer woods, to see the white fleeces of rural sheep instead of the darklings of the Park, and the frolics of joyous foals in the meadows instead of smart young women bucketting along the Row.

"God made the country and man made the town," he said to himself, quoting a poet whom his father loved and often quoted.

It was still early in the afternoon when he went in at the open gate of the Rectory garden. The estuary of the Exe lay before him, with crisp wavelets dancing in the sun. His father's parish was midway between Exeter and Exmouth, a place of quietness and fertile meadows, gardens brimming over with flowers, thatched cottages smothered with roses and honeysuckle, beehives, poultry-yards, and all rustic sights and sounds; a village in which a rector is a kind of king, exercising more influence than parliaments and potentates afar off.

Two girls were playing tennis on the lawn to the right of the long low verandah that screened the drawing-room windows, two glancing figures in white gowns that caught the sunlight. One he knew for his sister Lilian; the other was a stranger.

Lilian faced the carriage-drive by which he approached, recognised him, flung down her racquet with a joyful exclamation, and ran to meet him, heedless of her antagonist.

"I thought you were never coming near us again," she said, when they had kissed. "Mother has been full of anxieties about you. It was time you came; yes, high time, for you are looking dreadfully ill."

"Every one seems bent upon telling me that," he said, with a vexed air.

"You have been ill, I believe, and you never let us know."

"I am as well as I ever was in my life, and I have not been ill Two or three bad nights seem to have played havoc with my looks."

"It is the horrid life you lead in London—parties every day and every night; no respite, no repose. I hear of your doings, you see, though you so seldom write to any of us. Miss Vere, who is staying with me, knows all about you."

"Then Miss Vere possesses all knowledge worth having—from my point of view. I dare say she knows more about me than I know of myself. You shall introduce me to her, after I have seen my mother."

"You shall see mother without one moment's waste of time. Poor mother, she has so pined for you. Mother," called Lilian, addressing her fresh young voice to the verandah, "Mother, come out and be startled and delighted in a breath."

Gerard and his sister were moving towards the house as she called. A tall matronly figure emerged from the verandah, and a cry of gladness welcomed the prodigal son. In the next minute he was clasped to his mother's heart.

"My dearest boy."

"My ever dear mother."

"I have been so anxious about you, Gerard."

"Not without cause, dear mother. I was in very low spirits, altogether at odds with fortune a few days ago. But since then I have had a stroke of luck. I have come to tell you good news."

"You have written another book," she cried delightfully.

"Better than that."

"Nothing could be better than that, to my mind."

"What would you say if a good old man, whom I only saw once in my life, had left me a fortune?"

"I should say it was like a fairy tale."

"It is like a fairy tale, but I believe it is reality. I believe, because a London solicitor has advanced me a thousand pounds with no better security than my expectations. I have not sold my shadow, and I have not accepted the *Peau de chagrin*. I am substantially and realistically rich, and I can do anything in the world that money can do to make you and father and Lilian happy for the rest of your lives."

"You can give me a new racquet," said his sister. "It is a misery to play with this, and Barbara has the very latest improvement in racquets."

"'My mother had a maid called Barbara,'" quoted Gerard, laughing. "Miss Vere is your Barbara, I suppose?"

He went into the drawing-room with his mother, while Lilian ran to apologise to Miss Vere for her sudden desertion. Mother and son sat side by side, hand clasped in hand, and Gerard told her the strange history of his altered fortunes. He told her of his debts and of his despair, his utter weariness of life; but he did not tell her that he had contemplated suicide; nor did he fling across her simple thoughts the cloudy mysticism which has become a factor in modern life. He did not tell her of the scene in Jermyn's chambers, or of his vain endeavours to discover the whereabouts of those chambers; nor did he talk to her of Edith Champion, albeit she had some inkling of that romantic phase of his life.

She was enraptured at the thought of his good fortune, without one selfish consideration of the prosperity it would bring to her. In the midst of her rejoicing she began to talk to him about his health.

"You are not looking well, dearest," she said earnestly. "To those who love you your health is of far more importance than your fortune."

This harping on an unpleasant strain irritated him. This was the third time within the day that he had been told he looked ill.

"You women are all morbid," he said. "You poison your lives with unrealised apprehensions. If any one gave you the Koh-i-noor you would make yourselves miserable by the suspicion that it was only a bit of glass. You would want to break it up in order to be sure of its value. Suppose I have a headache—suppose I have had two or three bad nights, and am looking haggard and pale, what is that against two millions?"

"Two millions! Oh, Gerard, is your fortune anything like that?" asked his mother, in an awe-stricken voice.

"I am told that it is very much like that."

"It sounds like a dream. There is something awful in the idea of such wealth in the possession of one young man. And oh, Gerard, think of the thousands and tens of thousands who are almost starving."

"I suppose everybody will tell me that," exclaimed her son irritably. "Why should I think of the starving thousands? Why, just because I have the means of enjoying life, am I to make myself miserable by brooding upon the miseries of others? If it comes to that a man ought never to be happy while there is a single ill-used cab-horse in the world. Just think of all the horses in London and Paris that are underfed and overdriven, and have galled shoulders and cracked heels. There is madness in it. Think of the ill-treated children, the little children, the gutter-martyrs, whose lives are a burden. If we are to think of these things our choicest luxuries, our most exalted pleasures, must turn to gall and wormwood. For every pair of happy lovers there are women in degradation and despair, and men whose lightest touch is defilement. If we stop to consider how this world we live in—so full of exquisite beauty and eager, joyous life—is just as full of want and misery and crime, the sharp anguish of physical pain, and the dull agony of patient, joyless lives, there can be no such thing as pleasure. We must not give way to pity, mother. Since we cannot heal all these gaping wounds—since there is no possible panacea for the sufferings of a universe, we must narrow our thoughts and hopes to the limits of home and family, and say 'Kismet, Allah is good.' But for you, dearest, for you and all whom you want to help, my wealth shall be as potent as the four-leaved shamrock. You shall be my almoner. You shall find out which among all the never-ending schemes for helping the helpless are really good, and sound, and honest, and I will aid them with open hand."

"My dear son, I knew your heart was full of pity," murmured his mother tenderly.

"Oh, but I don't want to pity any one. I want you, with your clear, calm mind, to think and act for me. Everybody tells me I am looking haggard and ill, now just when life is worth cherishing. I want to avoid overmuch agitation. Let us talk of happier things. How is the dear governor, or the Rector, as he prefers to be called?"

"He has not been very well of late. Last winter tried him severely."

"He must spend next winter at San Remo or Sorrento. It will be only for you both to choose your locality."

"And I may see Italy before I die," gasped the Rector's wife, whose peregrinations hitherto had rarely gone beyond Boscastle on the one side and Bath on the other, with a fortnight in London once in two years.

"Yes, you shall see all that is fairest in this world," answered Gerard.

"Your father is spending the day in Exeter. What a delightful surprise for him when he comes home to dinner! But you must not wait for eight o'clock, Gerard. You must have something after your journey. Shall I order a chop, or a grilled chicken?"

"No, dear mother, I am too happy in your company to want such substantial food. I think I saw cups and saucers in the garden, under our favourite tree—

'And thou in all thy breadth and height
Of foliage, towering sycamore.'"

"Oh, Gerard, it is a tulip-tree. Your father would be dreadfully offended to hear it called a sycamore. Yes, you shall have some tea, dearest." She rang the bell, and ordered new-laid eggs, hot cakes, a regular Yorkshire tea, to be taken out to the garden. "What happiness to be sitting there with you once again. It is ages since you have been with us, except for just that hurried visit last Christmas."

Gerard sighed as he acknowledged the force of this reproach. All his summers of late years had been spent far afield. In the Tyrol, in Scotland, in Sweden, in Westmoreland, at Carlsbad, anywhere whither Mrs. Champion's caprices or Mr. Champion's "cure" led the lady and her satellite. He had enjoyed no more independent existence than one of Jupiter's moons, but had been constrained to revolve in the orbit of his planet.

He went into the garden with his mother. Every shrub was a reproach, for all had grown with the growth of years since he had seen them in their summer glory. A flying visit at Christmas or the New Year had been as much as his goddess allowed him. And now—albeit his chain was unbroken—he had a feeling that it was lengthened, and that he was going to do as he liked henceforward.

The stout, comfortable-looking butler, whom he remembered a lad in buttons, brought tea, and roasted cakes, and poached eggs, and clouted cream, and other rustic luxuries; and the tennis players, who had taken one tea at four o'clock, were very glad to take another at six. Gerard was introduced to Miss Vere, otherwise Barbara—a girl with a handsome face and a commanding figure, but who looked as if she had *vecu*, Gerard thought, and who at once began to talk of the houses at which they had met in London, which were all the smartest houses, be it remarked. The young lady sunk any lesser mansions at which they might have rubbed shoulders.

"I think you know Mrs. Champion," Miss Vere remarked innocently. "She and my cousin, Mrs. Harper, are great chums."

"Mrs. Theodore Harper?"

"Yes, Mrs. Theodore."

"I know her well, a very pretty woman."

"Yes, she is by way of being a beauty," said Miss Vere, who was much handsomer, and no doubt was fully aware of her superiority; "but don't you think she's rather silly about that boy of hers—taking him everywhere?"

"Upon that point I consider her positively imbecile. A child in an Eton jacket should not be obtruded upon the society of reasonable men and women. I believe she only takes him about with her in order that people may exclaim, 'Your son, Mrs. Harper? Impossible! How could you have a son of twelve years old, when you can be at most two and twenty?'"

"And then she smiles—carefully—through her magnolia bloom, and is perfectly happy for the rest of the afternoon, while the boy sits turning over illustrated books, and boring himself to death."

"Or sucking surreptitious lollipops, till some prosy old Etonian goes and sits beside him, and talks about the playing fields and the river," said Gerard.

Lilian and her mother sat smiling at this conversation, happily unconscious of its artificiality. Lilian, who was lily-fair and guileless as a child, looked up to Barbara Vere with eyes of admiring wonder. Miss Vere's exquisitely fitting gowns, her aplomb, and her knowledge of the side scenes of life commanded the village maiden's respect. To talk to a girl who had the peerage at her fingers' ends, knew to a shade every important person's political opinions, was familiar with all the society scandals and all the approaching alliances, was a privilege for the Rector's daughter. She wondered how the brilliant Barbara could endure the jog-trot domesticity of the Rectory, and it had never occurred to her that Barbara Vere put in for repairs at this quiet little harbour after the wear and tear of her annual voyage on the high seas of London society.

"I feel so fresh and so happy when I am with you," said Barbara. "I leave my French maid and my powder-box in London, and steep myself in the atmosphere of Milton's 'Allegro.'"

She might have added that in this clerical seclusion she did not trouble to make up her eyebrows, or to put on just that one artistic touch of rouge upon the cheek-bone, which in London drawing-rooms gave lustre to her fine dark eyes. Here her life was spent for the most part in a garden, and she was wise enough to know how ghastly all artificial embellishments become under such conditions.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FACE IN THE VISION.

The little party of four sat long at the tea-table under the leafy branches of the tulip-tree. The Rectory garden was on a level stretch of ground; but beyond the shrubbery that girdled lawn and parterre, the glebe meadows sloped towards the low, irregular cliff; and below the undulating line of the cliff danced the bright wavelets of the estuary. The garden and its surroundings were alike lovely, fertile, smiling—not the grand scenery of North Devon, nor the still bolder coast-line of North Cornwall, by that steep rock where once uprose Tintagel's crown of towers, but a placid and pastoral region which seems to invite restfulness and content with things that be rather than soaring aspirations or heroic endeavour.

Landward of the Rectory garden and orchard there rose a wooded hill, whose summit commanded a fine view of the channel, and the white-winged ships sailing away towards Start Point. That hill, with its wood and coppice, had been Gerard's delight in the summer holidays of boyhood. He had read there in his long vacations—and there were spots which to this hour recalled certain passages in Homer and Virgil, and certain difficulties in higher mathematics.

He thought of that far-off time as he sat, sipping a third cup of tea, in a dreamy mood, after having done scanty justice to the plethora of rustic fare. The two girls had gone indoors, leaving mother and son *tête-à-tête*, Mrs. Hillersdon sitting silent, plying those busy needles which knitted socks for half the old men and children in the parish, and Gerard lost in reverie. He was the first to break the silence.

"Mother, I saw a face the other day which reminded me of home —and of—ever so many years ago—five or six years, at least—and yet I can't associate the face with any one in this parish. I can't tell you how familiar it seemed, or how I have worried my brains to find out where and how I saw it."

"A man's face, or a woman's?"

"A girl's face—or rather say the face of a woman of three or four and twenty—a woman in humble life. It must have been one of your cottagers, but I can't identify her. It is a very lovely face."

"But where did you see this young woman? Why didn't you question her?"

"The face flashed upon me and was gone. There was no time for asking questions. I want you to help me, if you can. So lovely a face must have made some impression upon you. Think of the prettiest girls you have known in this village and the surrounding neighbourhood."

"There are so many pretty girls. Devon is famous for beauty. A good many of the cottagers about here have given me their photographs. People are very fond of being photographed now that the luxury is so cheap. I have an album that I keep on purpose for my parish friends. You can look through it this evening, if you like, and see if you can identify your young woman."

"She would not be one among a herd," Gerard answered irritably. "I know what Devonian beauty means—bright blue eyes, fine carnations. This girl is utterly unlike the type. Surely you can remember a girl of exceptional beauty, with whom we had some kind of association any time within the last ten years, but whom I must have seen seldom, or I should be able to identify her."

"Exceptional beauty!" repeated Mrs. Hillersdon, thoughtfully. "I can recall nobody in the parish whom I should call exceptionally beautiful. But men have such odd notions about beauty. I have heard a girl with a snub nose and a wide mouth extolled as if she were Venus. Why are you so anxious to know more about this young woman?"

"I have reason to think she is in distress, and I should like to help her—now that I am rich enough to do foolish things."

"It would not be foolish if she is a good girl—but beware of exquisite beauty in humble life, Gerard. It would make me miserable if——"

"Oh, my dear mother, we have all read 'David Copperfield.' I am not going to imitate Steerforth in his treatment of little Emily. I am mystified about this girl, and I want to learn who she is and whence she came."

"Not from this parish, Gerard, I am sure, unless you can find her in my album."

"Let me see your album, this minute," cried Gerard.

The parlourmaid approached as he spoke, and began to clear the tea-table.

"Run to my room and bring me the big brown photograph album," said Mrs. Hillersdon, and the brisk young parlourmaid tripped away and presently returned with a brown quarto which had seen long service. Gerard turned the leaves eagerly. He beheld a curious collection of old-fashioned finery, mushroom hats, crinolines, Garibaldi shirts, festoons, flounces, and Mariafolds, polonaises, jackets, mantles, of every style that has been worn within the last thirty years—old men and maidens, fathers, mothers, children, babies in abundance.

There were plenty of pretty faces—faces which even the rustic photographer could not spoil; but there was not one which offered the faintest resemblance to the face he had seen in Justin Jermyn's chambers.

"No!" he exclaimed, flinging the book upon the table in disgust, "there is no sign of her among your bumpkins."

"Please don't sneer at my bumpkins. You don't know what good, bright, patient, hardworking creatures there are among them, or how proud I am to know that they are fond of me."

"The girl I saw has an ethereal face—not flesh, but spirit—dreaming eyes, large and soft, shadowed by long dark lashes—fair hair, not golden, mark you—but distinctly fair, a pale soft brown, like the coat of a fallow deer. Her features are exquisitely delicate, modelling of nose and chin like a Madonna by Raffaelle—yes, it is a Raffaelle face, so soft in colouring, so spiritual—but sad, unutterably sad."

"Hester Davenport," exclaimed Mrs. Hillersdon, suddenly. "You have described her to the life. Poor girl. Where did you meet her? I thought she was in Australia."

"Perhaps only in a dream. But who is Hester Davenport?"

"Don't you remember the curate, Nicholas Davenport, the man whom your father engaged without adequate scrutiny into antecedents or character, on the strength of his fine manner and appearance, and his evident superiority to the common run of Churchmen—a man of great theological learning, your father told me? He had been tutor to Lord Raynfield's son—in Cumberland—and he gave your father a letter of recommendation from Lord Raynfield, dated some seven years before he came to us. You know how unsuspicious your father is. It never occurred to him that the man's character might have changed since that letter was written. He was with us a year and a half, and towards the end of that time his daughter came from Hanover, where she had been sent for a year or so to learn German. We were all struck with her beauty and sweet gentle manners."

"Yes, yes, I remember now. I was at home when she arrived. How could I forget? She came to tea with Lilian one afternoon when I was loafing about the garden, and I talked to her for five minutes or so, not more, for I had to hurry off to catch the train for Exeter. I saw her once after that—met her on the sands one morning. Yes, the face comes back to me as it was then—in all the freshness of girlhood."

"She was only seventeen when she came from Germany."

"And Davenport went wrong, turned out an incorrigible drunkard, did he not?"

"Yes; it was unspeakably sad. He used to have occasional lapses—never during his church work—but when he was about in the parish. He told your father that he suffered from slight attacks of epilepsy; so slight as to be of no hindrance to his duty. This went on for over a year, and then, on All Saints' Day, he had an attack in the reading-desk—a lapse of consciousness as your father called it. He seemed very strange. We were puzzled—but none of us guessed the dreadful truth, till one Sunday evening, about a month after his poor daughter came home from Germany, he went up into the pulpit, reeling, and clutching at the balustrade, and began to preach in the wildest language, uttering dreadful blasphemies, and bursting into hysterical laughter. Your father had to go up into the pulpit with one of the churchwardens and bring him down by main force. He was perfectly mad; but it was drink, Gerard, drink, that had caused all the evil. He had been taking brandy or chloral for years—sometimes one, sometimes the other. He was a secret drinker—that learned, intellectual man, a man who had taken the highest honours at Oxford, a man whom Oxford men remembered as a light among them."

"What became of him after that?".

"He had to leave us, of course, and as your father dared not recommend him to anybody, and as the scandal of his behaviour had been heard of throughout the diocese, there was no hope of his getting any further employment in the Church. Your father was very sorry for him, and gave him a little money to help him to emigrate. His old pupil, Lord Wolverley, helped him, and old college friends contributed, and he and his daughter sailed for Melbourne. I went to Plymouth to see them off, for I was very sorry for the poor motherless girl, in her deep distress, and your father and others wanted to be sure that they really got off, as Davenport was a shifty kind of man, and might have let the ship sail without him. They went out in a sailing vessel, crowded with first, second, and third-class emigrants. They went second-class, and I can see her now as I saw her that day, standing in the bows with her hand through her father's arm, while he waved his handkerchief to me. She was white and wan, poor child, but exquisitely lovely. I could not help thinking of what her life might have been if she had had good and prosperous parents; yet I know she adored that unhappy father."

"Exquisitely lovely, yes," mused Gerard, "and going out to a new world in an emigrant ship, and with a drunken old man for her only guardian and stay. A hard fate for exquisite loveliness, is it not, mother? And now, I believe she is in London, working at a sewing-machine for starvation wages."

"But how came you to learn so much, and yet not to know more?"

"Did I not tell you that it was a dream?" he asked, with a mocking smile! "But I mean to know more, mother; I mean to find this girl by hook or by crook, and to help her!"

"You must not mix yourself in her life, Gerard," said Mrs. Hillersdon, gravely; "that might end badly."

"Oh, mother, you are full of fears! One would think I were Mephistopheles, or Faust; while all I want is that my money may be of some use to a friendless girl. Hester Davenport! I remember how lovely I thought her, but I was no more in love with her than with the Venus of the Capitol. Strange that I should have failed to identify the face, till you helped me!"

He went indoors with his mother, and found his room—the room which had been his ever since he left the nursery—ready for occupation. The old nursemaid, whom he had teased and joked with in the old Marlborough holidays, had bustled and hurried to get Mr. Gerard's room aired and dusted, and his portmanteau unpacked, and all things arranged before the dressing-bell rang out from the old wooden cupola that crowned the low roof. Everything had the odour he knew so well—a perfume of lavender and dried rose leaves, mixed with some strange Indian scent which was an inheritance from his mother's side of the house, her people having been civilians of good standing in Bengal for half a century. It was a curious composite perfume, which for him meant the atmosphere of home, and brought back memories of childhood.

The Rector received the news of his son's altered fortunes at first with incredulity, and then with gladness mingled with awe.

"The whole business seems too wonderful to be true, Gerard," he said; "but if it really is true, you are just the luckiest fellow I ever heard of—to inherit an old man's wealth without ever having cringed to him or fawned upon him while he was alive—to receive two millions sterling, without having to say thank you, except to Providence!"

The Rector was by no means a selfish man, and he had been an indulgent father, bearing with a good deal of extravagance and some perversity on the part of his son, but he was not slow to see that this fortune must needs mean comfort and luxury for him in his declining years, and a freedom from financial cares which would be new to himself and his wife, liberally as the Rectory was administered. His living was worth seven hundred a year, and he and his wife between them had about four hundred of independent income; and it is not easy for a man of good family and with refined tastes to live within an income of eleven hundred a year, especially when he is rector of a rural parish in which the lower orders look to him for aid in all their necessities, while the surrounding gentry expect him to play an equal part in all their sports and hospitalities.

Gerard stayed with his people just two days. That was as much time as he could spare for inaction, since there was upon him the natural restlessness of a man whose fortunes have undergone a sudden and wondrous change, and who is eager to put newly acquired power to the test. Father, mother, and sister would gladly have kept him longer in that rural paradise, and Barbara Vere, having got wind of his inheritance, exercised all her blandishments, her spells of woven paces and of weaving hands, to bind him to her side. Garden, and hills, and rustic lanes, and summer sea, were all suggestive of restfulness and oblivion of the busy world;—but a young man who has just come into a fortune is no more to be satisfied with indolence in a garden than Eve was. He too, like Eve, longs to taste the fruit of the fatal tree.

"I have seen what life is like to a man who never has a spare five-pound note," Gerard told his sister; "I want to find out how life tastes to a millionaire. And when I have furnished rooms or a house, and have settled down a little, you must come and keep house for me, Lilian——"

"Nonsense, dear! You will be marrying before the year is out."

"I have no idea of marrying. There is nothing so unlikely as my marriage. You shall be mistress of my house."

"I couldn't leave mother—at least, not for ever so long," said Lilian.

"In years to come she will need you more than she needs you now. I begin to understand you, Lilian. That tall, ill-looking curate—Mr. Cumberland—has something to do with your hesitations."

"Do you think him so very ugly?" asked Lilian, with a distressed look.

"I didn't say very ugly; but I certainly don't think him handsome. That knotted and bulging brow means brains, I suppose."

"He was fifth wrangler, and he is a splendid musician," said his sister. "I wish you would stop till Sunday to hear what he has made of the choir."

"If he has made them sing in tune he must be a wonderful man. And so he is the person whose merits and fortunes are to colour your future, Lilian. I had no idea of it when I saw him hanging over your piano last night. I thought he was only a *pis-aller*. I suppose he is just the type of man girls in country parsonages admire—tall, athletic, with fine eyes, and dark overhanging brows, large strong hands, thick wavy hair, and a powerful baritone voice. I can quite understand your liking Mr. Cumberland; but what does the governor think of it all?"

"Father does not mind," Lilian answered naively. "Jack is of very good family, but he will have to get a living before we are married."

"He shall have a living—if he is worthy of my sister," said Gerard. "Money will buy livings—he shall be a pluralist if he likes."

"Oh, Gerard, he is the last man to like that. He has such a strong idea of duty. He would like a big parish in a sea-port, I think, with plenty of work. His best gifts are wasted in such a place as this, but all our people adore him. Father owns that he never had such a helper."

"My sweet enthusiast, we will look out for a big sea-port. You shall be a ministering angel to sailors and sailors' wives—you shall temper the cruelties of life in a crowded city—and, perhaps, by way of reward I shall hear some day that my sister's husband has been struck down by a malignant fever and that she has done herself to death while nursing him."

CHAPTER VII.

"IT IS AN OATH," SHE SAID.

GERARD went back to London, but eager as he was to return he felt a pang of regret as he bade his mother good-bye in the fresh early morning, and turned his face towards the great city. His brief visit to the old home had been an interval of rest in a life that lately had been all unrest. He fancied that *peau de chagrin* could hardly have shrunk by a hair's breadth during those hours of calm affection, of interchange of thought and feeling, without vehemence or excitement. To go back to Mrs. Champion and her set was like going back to the crust of a volcano. The rage of spending was upon him. He wanted to do something with the money which he had scarcely dared to calculate. He drove straight from Waterloo Station to Lincoln's Inn, and went through the schedule of his possessions with Mr. Cranberry, who was a little, dry old man, like the Princess Ida's father, and had none of the prestige and unctuousness of his junior partner Mr. Crafton. One could divine easily that while Mr. Crafton lived in a handsome "place" at Surbiton, grew pines and peaches, and prided himself upon his stable and garden, Mr. Cranberry was content with a dingy house in one of the Bloomsbury Squares, and restricted his pride of life to a few Dutch pictures, a good plain cook, and a cellar of comet port and old East Indian sherry.

From this gentleman Gerard Hillersdon elicited—together with much detail—the main fact that his capital, in and out of the banking-house of Milford and Co., summed up to a little over two millions, and might be taken to yield an average four and a half per cent., whereby his annual income amounted to ninety thousand pounds.

His cheek paled at the mere mention of the sum. It was too much undoubtedly, almost an evil thing to acquire such riches with a suddenness as of an earthquake or an apoplectic stroke. The magnitude of his wealth overawed him; and yet he had no desire to lessen it by any large act of benevolence or philanthropy. He had no inclination to give the London slums another breathing ground, or to sink a hundred thousand pounds upon a block of dwellings for the abjects of the great city. He was at once scared and elated.

"Let me have a few thousands immediately," he said; "open an account for me at Milford's bank. Let me feel that I am rich!"

"It shall be done," said Mr. Cranberry; and then he explained that there were certain formalities to be gone through, which could be completed without delay, if his client would give his mind to the business.

The two men drove round to the bank together. Cranberry opened his client's account with his own cheque for five thousand pounds, and a clerk handed Mr. Hillersdon a cheque-book. His first act on returning to his lodgings was to write a cheque for a thousand pounds, payable to the Rev. Edward Hillersdon, and this he enclosed in a brief scrawl to his mother:

"Ask the Rector to buy Lilian a new pony to replace poor Tiny

Tim, who has taken to stumbling rather badly," he wrote, "and beg him to do just what he likes with the rest of the money. I shall send you my little gift upon your birthday next week. Alas! I let the date slip by last year, unmarked by so much as a card."

It was too late to begin his search for a new domicile that afternoon, so he called on Mrs. Champion, who had gone to Charing Cross Station to meet her husband on his return from the Continent, and then he went on to the pretty little Sensorium, with its old-fashioned low-ceiled rooms, and bow windows looking into Birdcage Walk, and there he took tea with Roger Larose, who was generally to be found there at tea-time.

"I hear you have come into a fortune," said Larose, with his easy languor. "You have been trying to keep the fact dark, I know, but these things always ooze out."

"Who told you?"

"Nobody. It is in the air. I think I read a paragraph in the *Hesperus*. There are always paragraphs. I congratulate you upon your wealth. Is it much?"

"Yes; it is a good deal. My old friends needn't be afraid of borrowing a few pounds of me when they are hard up."

"Thanks, my dear Gerard. I will bear it in mind. And what are you going to do? Shall you really be content to live among us, and know us still?"

"The world and the people I know are quite the best world and people I have ever imagined; only I mean to have pleasant surroundings. Give me your counsel, Larose, as an architect and a man of taste. Shall I have chambers in the Albany, or a house and garden of my own?"

"A house, by all means! The Albany is old-fashioned; it savours of Pelham and Coningsby. You must have a house near the south side of Hyde Park,—a house in a walled garden. There are few such houses left now, and yours will be fabulously dear. That, of course, is a necessity. You must get an R.A. to decorate your walls. The President won't do it, but you must have an R.A."

"Thanks, I have my own ideas about decoration and furniture."

"And you don't want an R.A.? Extraordinary young man! However, your garden will be the grand point,—a garden in which you can entertain, a garden in which you can breakfast or dine *tête-à-tête* with your chosen friend, or with the select few. In London there is nothing like a garden for distinction. The costliness of it always tells. Sit down and write to a house-agent at once: some one near the Park. Messrs. Barley and Mennet? Yes, they will do. Tell them exactly what you want."

The letter was written at Larose's dictation—a house of such and such elevation; between Knightsbridge and the Albert Hall; stabling ample, but not too near the house; garden of at least an acre indispensable.

Messrs. Barley and Mennet's answer came by the eleven o'clock post on the following morning. They were pleased to state that by a happy conjunction of events—namely, the sudden death of a client, and his widow's withdrawal to the Continent—they had now at their disposal just such a house and grounds as Mr. Hillersdon required. Such houses, Messrs. B. and M. begged to remind Mr. H., were seldom in the market; they were as precious and as rare in their line as the Koh-i-noor or the Pitt diamond. The price asked for the beneficial lease of seventy-three and a quarter years was thirty thousand pounds, a very reasonable amount under the circumstances. The annual ground rent was two hundred and fifty pounds. The auctioneers enclosed a card to view, and Hillersdon set off at once, eager to see if the house realised their description. When he found himself in Piccadilly he thought he would ask Edith Champion to go and look at the house with him. The attention would please her, no doubt; and he had a vague feeling of remorse on her account, as if—although he had called on her yesterday—he had neglected her. Certainly under the old conditions he would have gone back to Hertford Street in the evening, instead of wandering from theatre to music-hall, and from music-hall to post-midnight club, with Roger Larose.

There were two carriages, a victoria and a pair-horse brougham, standing before Mr. Champion's house: a curious circumstance at that early hour. It occurred to Gerard that they looked like doctors' carriages, and the idea struck him with a sudden dread. Could anything evil have happened? Could she, whom he last saw splendid in health and beauty, have been stricken with sudden illness?

He asked the servant who answered his ring if Mrs. Champion was ill.

"No, sir, not Mrs. Champion," the man answered promptly; "Mr. Champion came 'ome out of 'calth, and there's been two doctors with 'im for the last 'arf-hour. Will you step up to the drawing-room, sir? My mistress is in the libery with the doctors, but I dare say she'll see you presently."

"Yes, I'll wait. I hope Mr. Champion is not seriously ill?"

"No, sir. Only a general derangement, I believe. He has been complaining for some time. Master is getting on in years, you see, sir," added the butler, with the privilege of an upper servant.

Getting on in years? Yes, James Champion was no doubt upon the downward slope of the hill, but until this moment Gerard had never thought of him as mortal, as a factor that might some day vanish out of the sum of Edith's life. The man seemed fenced round and protected by his wealth, and no more subject to sickness or death than a money-bag.

He was shown into the drawing-room, where the palms and flowers and innumerable prettinesses scattered about the tables were dimly seen in the tempered light. No broad sunshine ever glared into Mrs. Champion's rooms. Only under the lower edge of the festooned silken blinds was the brightness of the summer day allowed to filter through a screen of yellow marguerites that quivered and glanced in the noon-day light.

Gerard had the room to himself for nearly twenty minutes by the clock, and was beginning to lose patience, and to contemplate departure, when the portière was pushed aside and Edith Champion came into the room, dressed in a white muslin breakfast-gown, and with a face that matched her gown.

She came slowly towards him, as he advanced to meet her, looking at him with a curious earnestness.

"How pale you are!" he said. "I was shocked to hear that Mr. Champion was ill. I hope it is nothing serious?"

"It is serious; very serious!" she said, and then she put up her hands before her face, and tears streamed from between her jewelled fingers. "I am thinking how good he has been to me—how liberal, how indulgent, and how little I have ever done for him in return," she said, with unaffected emotion. "I am full of remorse when I think of my married life."

"My dear Edith," he said, taking her hand; "indeed you wrong yourself. You have done nothing of which you need be ashamed."

"I have always tried to think that, on my knees in church," she said. "I have taught myself to believe that there was no guilt in my life. Indeed, it seemed blameless compared with the lives of women I know; women with whom the world finds no fault. But I know now that I have been a wicked wife."

"But, Edith," returning naturally to the habit of a former time in his compassion for her grief, "you have never failed in your duty. There has been no shame in our friendship. It was natural that you and I, who are young, and who were once lovers, should take pleasure in each other's society. Mr. Champion has seen us together; he has never suspected evil."

"No; he is utterly without jealousy or suspicion. Perhaps that is because he has never really cared for me," she said, as if reasoning with herself. "But he has been always kind and indulgent, ready to gratify my lightest whim. And now I feel that I have been cold and ungrateful, indifferent to his feelings and inclinations, going my own way in blind self indulgence."

"My dear Edith, be assured this remorse is uncalled-for. You have been an excellent wife for Mr. Champion, who—who is not an emotional person, and would be only bored by a romantic affection. But is the case really so bad? Is your husband dangerously ill?"

"The case is hopeless. He cannot live long—perhaps a year, at most two years. He has known for some time that he was out of health. He consulted a doctor in Brussels, who rather scared him by his hints of evil. He came home out of spirits, very desponding about himself, and last night he sent for his doctor, and arranged a consultation with a specialist for this morning. Both doctors have been with me, telling me much more than they dared tell my husband. They have spoken fair words to him, poor dear man, but they have told me the truth. He cannot last more than two years. All that their science can do, all that healing springs and mountain air, and severe regimen, and careful nursing can do, is to spin out the weak thread of life for a year or two at most. He is only fifty-nine, Gerard, and he has toiled hard for his wealth. It seems cruel for him to be taken away so soon."

"Death is always cruel," Gerard answered vaguely. "I never thought of Mr. Champion as a man likely to die before the Scriptural three-score and ten."

"Nor I," said Edith. "God knows, I have never calculated upon his death."

There was a silence, as they sat side by side, her pale cheeks wet with tears, her hands clasped upon her knee, he sorely embarrassed, feeling all that was painful in their position.

"Is it true about this fortune of yours?" she asked, after a long pause.

"Yes, the thing is a reality. I am beginning to believe in it myself. I came to you this morning to ask you to help me choose a house."

"You are going to take a house!" she exclaimed. "That means you are going to be married."

"Nothing of the kind. Why should not a bachelor, who can afford it, amuse himself by creating a home and a fireside?"

"Oh, I am afraid, I am afraid," she murmured. "I know all the women will run after you. I know how desperate they are when a rich marriage is the prize for which they are competing. Gerard, I think you have cared for me always—a little—in all these years."

"You know that I have been your slave," he answered. "Without any pretensions that could wrong Mr. Champion, I have gone on blindly adoring you—as much your lover as I was before you jilted me."

"Oh, Gerard, I was not a jilt. I was made to marry Mr. Champion. You can't imagine what influences are brought to bear upon a girl who is the youngest member of a large family—the preaching of mother and father, and aunts and uncles, and worldly-wise cousins, and elder sisters. It is the constant dropping that wears out a stone, the everlasting iteration. They told me I should spoil your life as well as my own. They painted such awful pictures of our future—cheap lodgings—exile—and then perhaps the workhouse—or worse, even—suicide. I thought of that picture in Frith's 'Road to Ruin'—the wretched husband alone in a garret, preparing to shoot himself. Gerard, I thought of you ruined and penniless like that man, contemplating suicide."

Gerard smiled curiously, remembering how only a few days ago he had contemplated, and even resolved, upon that last act in the tragedy of failure.

Edith Champion had risen in her agitation, and was moving restlessly about the room. She turned suddenly in her pacing to and fro, and came towards Gerard, who had taken up his hat and stick preparatory to departure.

"Tell me once more that you do not mean to marry—yet awhile," she said, with feverish intensity.

"Believe me, there is nothing further from my thoughts."

"And you are not weary of me? I am still as much to you as I was years ago when we were engaged?"

"You are and have been all the world to me since first we met," he answered tenderly.

"Then you can promise me something, Gerard. If that is true—if I am indeed your only love—it cannot hurt you to promise," she faltered, drawing nearer to him, laying a tremulous hand upon his shoulder, and looking at him with tearful eyes.

"To promise what, dearest?"

"That you will not marry any one else—that you will wait till—till I am free. Oh, Gerard, don't think me cruel because I count upon that which must be. I mean to do my duty to my husband; I mean to be a better wife to him than I have ever been; less selfish, less given over to worldly pleasures, luxury, and show—more thoughtful of him and his comfort. But the end must come before very long. The doctors told me to be prepared. It may come soon and suddenly—it must come before I am two years older I shall not be an old woman even then, Gerard," she said, smiling through her tears, knowing herself his junior by a year or so, "and I hope I shall not be an ugly woman. Will you promise to wait?"

"Willingly, Edith, were the years ten instead of two."

"Will you promise?"

"Yes, I promise."

"It is an oath," she said. "Say that you will be true to me by all you hold most sacred in this world and the next, as you are a man of honour."

"As I am a man of honour, I will marry you, and none other. Will that satisfy you?"

"Yes, yes!" she cried hysterically; "I am content. Nothing else would have given me peace. I have been tormenting myself ever since I heard of your fortune. I hated the poor old man whose gratitude enriched you. But now I can be at rest; I can trust implicitly in your honour. I can trust you now, Gerard, and I can do my duty to my husband, undisturbed by cares and anxieties about the future. We shall not meet so often as we have done, perhaps. I shall go less into society; my life will be less frivolous, but you will still be *l'ami de la maison*, won't you? I shall see you oftener than any one else?"

"You shall see me as often as you and Mr. Champion choose to invite me. But tell me more about him. Is it the heart that is wrong?"

"Oh, it is a complication—weak heart, over-worked brain, gouty tendency, and other complications. You know how strong he looks, what a solid block of a man. Well, he is like a citadel that has been long undermined, which may fall at any time, perhaps without warning, or may crumble slowly, inch by inch. The doctors told me much that I could not understand, but the main fact is only too clear. He is doomed."

"Does he know? Have they told him?"

"Not half what they told me. He is not to be alarmed. Most of the evil has arisen from over-work—the strain and fever of the race for wealth—and while he has been wasting his life in the effort to make money, I have been spending it, oh, how recklessly! I am full of remorse when I think that I have been spending, not money, but my husband's life."

"My dear Edith, it is his *metier*, his one amusement and desire to make money, and as for your extravagance, it has been after his own heart. A less costly wife would not have suited him."

"Yes, that is quite true. He has always encouraged me to spend money. But it is sad, all the same. He did not know that money meant his heart's blood. It has been going drop by drop."

"We spend our lives as we live them, Edith," Gerard answered gloomily. "All strong passion means so much loss. We cannot live intensely and yet live long. You know Balzac's story, 'La Peau de Chagrin.'"

"Yes, yes; a terribly sad story."

"Only an allegory, Edith. We are all living as Raphael de Valentine lived, although we have no talisman to mark the waste of our years. Good-bye. You will come and help me to choose my house, in a few days, will you not?"

"Yes, in a few days. When I have recovered from the shock of this morning."

He went out into the broad bright sunshine, agitated, but by no means unhappy.

It was a relief to see the end of that dubious and not altogether delightful road along which he had been travelling, that primrose path of dalliance which had seemed to lead no whither.

He had pledged himself for life, as surely as if he had vowed the marriage vow before the altar, or allowed himself to be booked and docketted in a registrar's office. For a man of honour there could be no retreat from such a vow. Nothing but shame or death could cancel the promise he had given. But he had no regret for having so promised. He had no foreshadowing of future evil. He had only confirmed by a vow the bondage into which he had entered years ago, when all life lay new and untried before him. This woman was still to him the dearest of all women, and he was willing to be bound to her.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SHADOW ACROSS THE PATH.

THE house-agents had been more truthful than their kind are wont to be, and the house which Mr. Hillersdon had been invited to inspect more nearly realised their description than houses generally do. Of course it was not all that he wanted; but it possessed capabilities; and it stood in grounds which are becoming daily more difficult to find on the south side of Hyde Park. It was an old house, and somewhat dismal of aspect, the garden being shut in by high walls, and overshadowed by timber; but Gerard was pleased with that air of seclusion which would have repelled many people, and he saw ample scope for improvement in both house and grounds. He closed with the owner of the lease on the following day; and he had Roger Larose at work upon plan and specification without an hour's delay. The house belonged to the period when all façades of important houses were Italian, and Gerard insisted upon the Italian idea being strictly carried out in the improved front and added wings.

"Let there be no mixture of styles," he said, "that is anathema maranatha in my mind. Above all, be neither Flemish nor Jacobean—the school has been overdone. Let your portico be light and graceful, yet severe; and give me a spacious loggia upon the first floor, between your new wings, which will consist each of a single room—billiard-room on one side and music-room on the other.

The delighted Larose assured his client that the Italian school was his passion, and that he, too, was weary of the oriels and bays, the turrets and angles, cupolas and quaintness of the flamboyant Flemish, miscalled Queen Anne. He took his designs to Mr

Hillersdon within twenty-four hours after their inspection of the premises, and the new front and wings looked charming upon paper. There was no question of competition, which would involve delay. Gerard begged that the designs might be given to the best builder in London, and carried out with the utmost rapidity compatible with good work.

"I must have everything finished before November," he said.

Roger Larose urged that it was hardly possible that two large rooms, and a new façade, with portico, loggia, and classic pediment, to say nothing of various minor improvements, could be completed in so short a time.

"Nothing is impossible to a man of energy, with ample funds at his disposal," answered Gerard. "If your plans cannot be carried out in four months, my dear Larose, they are useless, and I will occupy the house as it now stands."

The commission was too good to be lost, and Larose promised to achieve the impossible.

"I don't believe such a thing was ever done before, except for Aladdin," he said.

"Consider me Aladdin, if you like; but do what I want."

The garden was Gerard's own peculiar care. The landscape gardener whom he called in wanted to cut down at least half the trees—limes and chestnuts of more than a century's growth—upon the pretence that they darkened the house, and that a smooth lawn and geometrical flower beds were to be preferred to spreading branches under which no turf could live. Gerard would not sacrifice a tree.

"You will lay down fresh turf early in April every year," he said, "and with care we must make it last till the end of July."

The nurseryman booked the order, and felt that this was a customer who deserved his best consideration.

"And you will supply me with palms and orange trees, standard rhododendrons, and other ornamental plants every season. It will be your business to see that they do well while the season lasts."

"Exactly, sir, I perfectly understand your views. The lawn is considerably contracted by that belt of timber, but we can make a fine show of oranges in tubs, standard rhododendrons, and hardy palms in the portico and on the lawn, and you will retain your lime grove, which is, no doubt, an enjoyable feature of the grounds, a remarkable feature in grounds so near London."

For the furnishing of his house Mr. Hillersdon consulted the man who had dictated her taste to Mrs. Champion. The source of a lady's taste and knowledge becomes forgotten after a year or two, and she takes credit to herself for having evolved her surroundings for her inner consciousness. But on being asked about her views as to furniture, Mrs. Champion suggested the employment of Mr. Callander, a gentleman who made it his business to create homes of taste for those who could afford to carry out his ideal.

"One has ideas of one's own, of course," said Edith Champion. "I was full of original ideas for my drawing-rooms and morning-room, but I found it very difficult to get them carried out. Tradespeople are so stupid. Mr. Callander helped me immensely with drawings and suggestions. In your case I should certainly go to him."

Gerard took her advice, and went to Mr. Callander, of whom Larose declared that he was the only man in London who had any taste in furniture.

To this gentleman the millionaire explained his desires very briefly.

"My house is to be severely Italian," he said, "and I want you to furnish it as if it were a villa between Florence and Fiesole, and as if I were Leonardo di Medici."

"And is expense to be no more considered than if you were one of the Medici?"

"You can spend as much as you like, but you must not make any display of wealth. I have come unexpectedly into a fortune, and I don't want people to point to me as a *nouveau riche*."

"Your house shall be furnished with a subdued splendour which shall make people think that your surroundings have descended to you from a Florentine ancestor. There shall be nothing to suggest newness, or the display of unaccustomed wealth."

"You are evidently an artist, Mr. Callander. Try to realise the artistic ideal in all its purity. But remember, if you please, there are two rooms on the first floor, to the left of the staircase, which I mean to furnish myself, and for which you need not provide anything."

It was now the third week in July, and London was beginning to put on its deserted aspect. Three weeks ago it had been a work of difficulty to cross from one side of Bond Street to the other; but now crossing the most fashionable thoroughfares was as easy and leisurely a matter as a stroll in daisied meads. Everybody was leaving town or talking of leaving, and dinners and balls were becoming a memory of the past, except such small dinners as may be given to the chosen few during a period of transition. Goodwood was over, and after Goodwood the tocsin of retreat is sounded.

Gerard dined in a party of four in Hertford Street. Mrs. Gresham had returned for a final glimpse of London, after a fortnight's severe duties in her husband's parish. He was Vicar of a curious old settlement in Suffolk, a little town which had been a seaport, but from which the sea had long since retired, perhaps disgusted with the dulness of the place.

She was delighted to see Mr. Hillersdon again, and he could but note the increased fervour of her manner since his improved fortunes.

"I hope you have forgiven me for my premature application about the chancel," she said, plumping herself down upon the causeuse where he had seated himself after talking for a few minutes with his host. "It was dreadfully premature, I know; but if you could see our dear, quaint, old church, with its long narrow nave and lofty roof, I'm sure you would be interested. Do you know anything about church architecture in Suffolk?"

"I blush to say it is one of the numerous branches of my education which have been neglected."

"What a pity! Our East Anglian churches are so truly interesting. Perhaps you will come down and see us at Sandyholme some day?"

"Is Sandyholme Mr. Gresham's parish?"

"Yes; we have the dearest old Vicarage, with only one objection—there are a good many earwigs in summer. But then our earwigs are more than counterbalanced by our roses. We are on a clay soil, don't you know? I do hope you will come some Saturday and spend Sunday with us. You would like Alec's sermon, I know; and for a little Suffolk town our choir is not so very bad. I give up two evenings a week to practice with them. You will think about it, now, Mr. Hillersdon, won't you?"

"Yes, certainly I will think about it," answered Gerard, meaning never to do more.

He had not been very attentive to the lady's discourse, for his thoughts had been engrossed by Mr. Champion, who was standing on the hearthrug, with his back to an arrangement of orchids which filled the fireplace, and which for a man of chilly temperament poorly replaced the cheery fire. He was indeed what his wife had called him—a solid block of a man, short, sturdy, with massive shoulders and broad chest, large head and bull-neck, sandy-haired, thick-featured, with the indications of vulgar lineage in every detail. A man who had made his own career, evidently, and who had sacrificed length of years in the endeavour to push his way ahead of his fellow-men; a resolute, self-sufficient, self-contained man, proud of his success, confident of his own merits, not easily jealous, but, it might be, a terrible man if betrayed;—not a man to shut his eyes to a wife's treachery, once suspected.

Of ill-health the tokens were of the slightest. A livid tinge under the eyes and about the coarsely moulded mouth, a flaccidity of the muscles of the face, and a dulness in the tarnished eyeballs, were all the marks of that slow and subtle change which had been creeping over the doomed victim during the last few years, unnoted by himself or those about him.

At dinner the talk was chiefly of the approaching departure. Mr. and Mrs. Champion were going to Mont Oriol.

"You'll look us up there, I suppose, Hillersdon," said Champion; "my wife could hardly get on without you; you are almost as necessary to her as her dachshunds."

"Yes, I dare say I shall find my way to Mont Oriol. I am by nature irresolute. You and Mrs. Champion have often saved me the trouble of deciding on holiday haunts."

"And now that you are rich I suppose you will be idler than ever," suggested Champion.

"Upon my word, no. My case seemed too hopeless for improvement while I was poor, and the stern necessity to earn money benumbed any small capacity I may have had for writing a readable story."

"You wrote one that delighted everybody," interposed Mrs. Gresham, who but dimly remembered the subject of his book, and was hardly sure of the title.

"But now that I need no longer write for bread my fancy may have a new birth. At any rate, it need not dance in fetters."

Mr. Champion went off to his whist club after dinner. He played whist at the same club every evening during the London season, unless peremptorily called upon to accompany his wife to some festive gathering. He was a very silent man, and had never been fond of society, though he liked to have a fine house and a handsome wife, and to give dinners which very respectable, and even smart people, considered it a privilege to eat. His greatest pleasure was found in the city, his chief relaxation at the whist table.

"Don't be late, James," his wife said to him kindly, as he muttered something about stepping round to the club. "Your doctor makes such a strong point of your getting a long night's rest."

"If my doctor could give me the capacity to sleep, I should set a higher value on his advice," said Champion, "but you need not be afraid, I shall be home at eleven."

When Mr. Champion was gone Mrs. Gresham was sent to the piano in the inner drawing-room, and Edith and Gerard were practically *tête-à-tête*. Cousin Rosa was very fond of music, and still fonder of her own playing.

She at once attacked Mendelssohn's Capriccio, while the other two drew nearer to the verandah, and the perfume of the flowers, and the cool, starlit street, and began to talk.

"I have been thinking a great deal about you lately," said Edith, and there was the sound of anxiety in her voice.

"It is very good of you to keep me in your thoughts."

"Good of me! I cannot help myself. If I did not care for you more than I care for any one else in the world, the strangeness of our position would make me think about you. I have been full of such curious thoughts: but perhaps that is only because I have been reading 'La Peau de Chagrin' again, after having almost forgotten the story. It is a horrid story."

"No, no, Edith, a magnificent story, full of the profoundest philosophy."

"No, it is only full of gloom. Why is that young man to die, simply because he has inherited a fortune? The story is dreadful, like a haunting, horrible dream. I can see that unhappy young man—so gifted, so handsome—sitting face to face with that hideous talisman, which diminishes with his every wish, and marks how his young life is wasting away. I have not been able to get the story out of my mind."

"You are too impressionable, my dear Edith; but I own the story has a gloomy fascination which makes it difficult to forget. It was the book which established Honoré de Balzac's fame, and it seems to me that the hero is only a highly coloured image of the author, who wasted life and genius as feverishly as Raphael de Valentin—living with the same eager intensity, working with the same fervid concentration, and dying in the zenith of his power, though by no means in the bloom of his youth."

"Was not Alfred de Musset of the same type?"

"Undoubtedly. The type was common to the epoch. Byron set the example, and it was the fashion for men of genius to court untimely death. Musset, the greatest poet France has ever had, son of the morning, elegant, aristocratic, born to love and to be loved, after a youth of surpassing brilliance, wasted the ripest years of manhood in the wine shops of the Quartier Latin, and was forgotten like a light blown out, long before the end of his life. Our geniuses of to-day know better how to husband their resources. They are as careful of their brain-power as an elderly spinster of her Sunday gown."

"How much better for them and for posterity," said Mrs. Champion. "Please go on, Rosa," as Mrs. Gresham made a show of rising from the piano. "Grieg is always delightful."

"So he is; but I have been playing Rubinstein," replied Rosa, severely.

"Then do play that sweet prelude of Chopin's in A flat major."

"Why, I played it ten minutes ago," answered the lady at the piano.

"How sweet of you! You know how I worship Chopin," answered Edith, unabashed, and immediately went on talking.

"I dare say it is only the effect of that horrible story," she said, "but I have been feeling absurdly morbid of late, and I can't help tormenting myself about your health."

"A most futile torment, since I am perfectly well," Gerald answered irritably.

"No doubt, no doubt; but my husband seemed perfectly well last year, and yet there was all manner of organic mischief. I know you are not strong, and since you came into your fortune you have been looking dreadfully ill."

"So my mother told me. Gold has evidently a bad effect upon the complexion, and yet the seventeenth century physicians considered it a fine tonic, boiled in broth."

"I want you to do me a favour, Gerard."

"Command my devotion in all things, great and small."

"Oh, it is not a great thing. You will come to Mont Oriol, of course?"

"Yes. If that is all you were going to ask——"

"It is something more than that. Before you leave London I want you to consult the cleverest physician you can find. The man who knows most about brain, and heart, and lungs."

"A wide field for scientific exploration. I suppose you really mean the man who has contrived to make himself the fashion—the man to whom it is the right thing to go."

"No, no. I am not the slave of fashion. Go to some one who will understand you—who will be able to advise you how to enjoy your life, without wasting it as Balzac and Musset did."

"Have no fear. I am no Balzac or Musset. I have no Byronic fire consuming me; and be assured I mean to husband my life—for the sake of the years to come—which should be very happy."

He took up the hand lying loose in her lap, the beautiful, carefully cherished hand which the winds of heaven never visited too roughly, and bent down to kiss it, just as the Moonlight Sonata came to a close.

"Oh, do go on, Rosa. Some more Mendelssohn, please."

With perhaps the faintest touch of malice Mrs. Gresham attacked the Wedding March, with a crash that made the lamp glasses shiver.

"Do you know of any clever physician?" asked Edith.

"I have never needed a physician since I was eleven years old, and the only famous doctor I know is the man who saved my life then, Doctor South, the children's doctor. I have half a mind to go to him."

"A child's doctor!" said Edith, shrugging her shoulders.

"Children have hearts, and brains, and lungs. I dare say Dr. South knows something about those organs, even in adults."

"You will go to him to-morrow morning, then—and if he is not satisfied he will advise another opinion. I should have preferred the new German doctor, whom everybody is consulting, and who does such wonders with hypnotism—Dr. Geistrauber. They say he is a most wonderful man."

"'They' are an authority not always to be relied upon. I would rather go to Dr. South, who saved my life when I was in knickerbockers."

"Were you so very ill then?" asked Mrs. Champion, tenderly interested even in a crisis of seventeen years ago.

"Yes; I believe I was as bad as a little lad can be, and yet live. When I try to remember my illness it seems only a troubled dream, through which Dr. South's kindly face looms large and distinct. My complaint was inflammation of the lungs, a malady which Dr.

South said most children take rather kindly; but in my case there were complications. I was like Mrs. Gummidge, and the disease was worse for me than for other children. I was as near death's door as any one can go without crossing the threshold; and my people believe to this day that but for Dr. South I should have entered at that fatal door. It was a pull for a man of my father's means to bring down the famous children's doctor, but the dear old dad never regretted the heavy fee; and here I am to tell the story, of which I knew very little at the time, for I was off my head all through the worst of my illness, and I believe there was one stage of delirium during which I associated Dr. South's fine grey head—prematurely grey—with a great white elephant of Siam of which I had been reading in 'Peter Parley's Annual.'"

"Poor dear little fellow!" sighed Edith Champion, with retrospective affection.

"How sweet of you to pity me! I find myself pitying my own small image in that dim and troubled time, as if it were anybody's child. The complications were dreadful—pleurisy, pneumonia; I believe the local doctor found a new name for my complaint nearly every day, till Dr. South gave his decisive verdict, and then pulled me through by his heroic treatment. Yes, I will go to him to-morrow; not because I want medical advice, but because I should like to see my old friend again."

"Go to him; pray go to him," urged Edith, "and tell him everything about yourself."

"My dear Edith, I have no medical confession to make. I am not ill."

Mrs. Gresham had played herself out, for the time being, and came into the front drawing-room as the footman appeared with tea *à la Française*—tea that knits up the ravell'd sleave of care, tired Nature's nurse, for Duchesses as well as for washerwomen.

The talk became general, or became, rather, a lively monologue on the part of Rosa Gresham, who loved her own interpretation of Chopin or Charvenka, but loved the sound of her own voice better than any music that ever was composed.

Mr. Champion reappeared a few minutes after eleven, looking tired and white after an hour and a half at the whist club, and Hillersdon went out as his host came in—went out, but not home. He walked eastward, and looked in at two late clubs, chiefly impelled by his desire to meet Justin Jermyn, but there was no sign of the Fate-reader either at the Petunia or the Small-Hours, and no one whom

Hillersdon questioned about him had seen him since Lady Fridoline's party.

"He has gone to some Bad in Bohemia," said Larose; "a Bad with a crackjaw name. I believe he invents a name and a Bad every summer, and then goes quietly and lives up the country between Broadstairs and Birchington, and basks all day upon some solitary stretch of sand, or on the edge of some lonely cliff, where the North Sea breezes blow above the rippling ripeness of the wheat; and lies in the sunshine, and plans fresh impostures for the winter season. No one will see him or hear of him any more till November, and then he will come back and tell us what a marvellous place Rumpelstiltzkinbad is for shattered nerves; and he will describe the scenery, and the hotel, and the hot springs, and the people—ay, almost as picturesquely as I could myself," concluded Larose, with his low, unctuous chuckle, which was quite different from Jermyn's elfin laughter, and as characteristic of the man himself.

Hillersdon stayed late at the Small Hours, and drank just a little more dry champagne than his mother or Mrs. Champion would have approved, women having narrow notions about the men they love, notions which seem hardly ever to pass the restrictions of the nursery. He did not drink because he liked the wine, nor even for joviality's sake; but from a desire to get away from himself and from a sense of irritation which had been caused by Mrs. Champion's suggestions of ill-health.

"I shall be hypnotised into an invalid if people persist in telling me I am ill," he said to himself, dwelling needlessly upon Edith Champion's anxieties.

The market carts were lumbering into Covent Garden when he went home, and as the natural result of a late night and an unusual amount of champagne, he slept ill and woke with a headache. He breakfasted upon a devilled biscuit and a cup of green tea, and was in Harley Street before eleven o'clock.

Having made no appointment, Mr. Hillersdon had to undergo the purgatory of the waiting-room, where an anxious and somewhat dowdy mother was trying to beguile the impatience of a rickety son with picture books, and, in her gentle solicitude, offering a curious contrast to a much smarter mother, whose thoughts seemed to be rather with an absent dressmaker than with her sickly, overgrown girl, to whom she spoke occasionally in accents of reproof, or in lachrymose complaint at having to wait so long for Dr. South, while Madame Viola was no doubt waiting for her—"and when I do get to Bruton Street very likely she won't see me," lamented the lady, in an undertone. "It's all your fault, Clara, for catching cold. You are so idiotic about yourself. I dare say you will be ordered off to some expensive place in Switzerland. Doctors have no consideration for one."

The girl's only reply to this maternal wailing was a little hacking cough, which recurred as often as a comma. Her wan face and rather shabby frock contrasted with the mother's artistic bloom and perfect tailor gown. Hillersdon felt a sense of relief when the man in black looked in at the door, and summoned mother and daughter with a mysterious nod, which seemed pregnant with mournful augury, although it meant nothing but "your turn."

The anxious lady impressed him so much more pleasantly that, as time hung heavy, he made friends with the boy, helped to entertain him by presenting the illustrations of a zoological book in a new light for the next quarter of an hour; and then the rickety boy and his mother were summoned, and more patients came in, and Hillersdon tried to lose his consciousness of the passing moments in the pages of a stale *Saturday Review*,—moments too distinctly measured by the ticking of a very fine Sherraton clock, which stood sentinel in a niche by the sideboard.

The man in black came for him at last, as it were the fatal ferryman ready for a new passenger, and he was ushered into the presence of Dr. South, whom he found in a spacious room at the back of the house, lighted by a large window, which commanded a metropolitan garden, shut in by ivy-covered walls.

The grey hair and genial smile brought back a vision of a little bed near a sunny window, and summer breezes blowing over a head that seemed to scorch the pillow where it lay.

He recalled the childish illness and the Devonian Rectory to Dr. South, who remembered his journey by the night mail, and his arrival at daybreak in the stillness of a summer Sabbath morning—no labourer going out to the fields, only the song of the lark high up in the infinite blue above the ripening wheat. Dr. South had not forgotten that long summer day, in which, like many another medical Alcides, he had fought with death, wrestled with and thrown the grisly shade, and had gone back to his hospital and his London patients, leaving hope and comfort behind him.

"I know I was very much interested in the case," he said. "Your mother was such a sweet woman. She has been spared to you, I hope."

"Yes, thank God, she is in excellent health—a young woman still in mind and habits."

And then he told Dr. South how, being just a little uneasy about his own constitution—though with no consciousness of any evil—he had come to be overhauled by the physician whose skill he knew by experience.

"Please consider me a little lad again," he said lightly, "and knock my chest about as you did when I was lying in a troubled dream, making nonsense-pictures of all my surroundings."

"We shall not find much amiss, I hope," replied the doctor, with his kindly smile. "Take off your coat and waistcoat, if you please."

The auscultation was careful and prolonged. There was none of that pleasantly perfunctory air with which the physician dismisses a good case. Dr. South seemed bent upon exploring every square inch of that well set-up frame, from shoulders to waist, with bent head and stethoscope at his ears. He concluded his examination with a faint sigh, which might mean only fatigue.

"Do you find anything amiss?" asked the patient, rather anxiously.

"I cannot detect absolute organic mischief, but there is a certain amount of weakness in both heart and lungs. You have had some painful shock very lately, have you not? Your nerves have been greatly shaken."

"I have had a great surprise, but it was pleasant rather than painful."

"I rejoice to hear it, but the fact that a pleasant surprise should have so unhinged you is in itself a warning."

"How so?"

"It denotes highly strung nerves and a certain want of stamina. To be frank with you, Mr. Hillersdon, yours is not what we call a good life; but many men of your constitution live to old age. It is a question of husbanding your resources. With care, and a studious avoidance of all excesses, moral or physical, you may live long."

Gerard thought of the *peau de chagrin.* A studious avoidance of excess—in other words, a constant watch upon that red line upon the sheet of white paper which showed the shrinking of the talisman. Little by little, with every hour of agitated existence, with every passionate heart-throb, and every eager wish, the sum total of his days would dwindle.

"I have just come into a large fortune, and am only beginning to live," he said fretfully. "It is hard to be told at this juncture that I have not a good life."

"I cannot prophesy smooth things, Mr. Hillersdon. You come to me for the truth?"

"Yes, yes, I know; and I am grateful to you for your candour; but still it is hard lines, you must allow."

"It would be harder if you were a struggling professional man, and saw your career blighted at the outset. I am very glad to hear of your good fortune. With the resources and expedients of modern science—which are all at the command of wealth—you ought to live to be eighty."

"Yes, but at the price of an unemotional life. I am to vegetate, not to live!"

He slipped the neatly papered guineas into the doctor's hand, and then turning on the threshold he asked nervously—

"Do you forbid me to marry, lest I should become the father of a consumptive progeny?"

"By no means. I find no organic mischief, as I told you. I would strongly advise you to marry. In a happy domestic life you would find the best possible environment for a man of your somewhat fragile physique and highly nervous temperament."

"Thanks; that is encouraging, at any rate. Good day."

After leaving the doctor Hillersdon strolled across Portland Place and into the Portland Road, where he made an exploration of the second-hand furniture shops, in search of certain objects which were to assist in realising his idea as to those two rooms in his Italian villa which he had taken upon himself to furnish.

An hour's peregrination from shop to shop resulted only in the purchase of one piece of furniture—a black oak cabinet, ostensibly of the sixteenth century, possibly a clever piece of patchwork put together last year. It satisfied Gerard Hillersdon because it closely resembled another black oak cabinet which he had seen lately.

He had taken it into his head to reproduce for his own private den those two rooms in which he had sat at supper with Justin Jermyn, and where he had seen the vision of Hester Davenport; rooms which perhaps had no tangible existence, dream-rooms, the shadow-pictures of a hypnotic trance. It pleased him to think that he could reproduce in solid oak and brass, in old Venetian glass and quaint Dutch pottery, the scene which might have been made up of shadows, since his failure to discover the house or the locality of the house where he had supped with Jermyn had given a tinge of unreality to all his memories of that eventful night.

CHAPTER IX.

"I BUILT MY SOUL A LORDLY PLEASURE-HOUSE."

For those who were not bound by their doctors to some constraining regimen of bathing and self-denial, life at Mont Oriol was one perpetual holiday. Such visitors as Edith Champion lived only to amuse themselves—to drive to distant ruins—ride in the early morning when the sun-baked grass was cooled with dew, play cards or billiards, and dance in the evening. For Mr. Champion Mont Oriol meant daily baths, a severe regimen as to meat and drink, and a strict avoidance of all business transactions, such transactions being the very delight of his life, the salt which gave life its savour, and without which the man felt himself already dead.

"There are men who are dead from the waist downwards," he said one day, "and who have to be dragged about in bath chairs, or lifted in and out of a carriage. I don't pity them, as long as they are allowed to write their own business letters. I am dead from the waist upwards."

He had his secretary with him at Mont Oriol, and in spite of all prohibitions, that falcon eye of his was never off the changes of the money market. He had telegrams from the Stock Exchange daily, in his own particular cypher, which was at once secret and economical. There were days when tens of thousands trembled in the balance, while he sat taking his sun-bath on the terrace in front of the hotel, and when the going down of the sun interested him only because it was to bring him tidings of loss or gain.

"Would you like a set of opals, Edith?" he asked one day at afternoon tea, crumpling up the little bit of blue paper which had just been brought to him. "I have made some money by a rise in Patagonian Street Railways."

"A thousand thanks, but you forget the opals you gave me two years ago. I don't think you could improve upon those."

"Yes, I had forgotten them. They belonged to a Russian Princess. I got them for about half their value. Then I suppose there is nothing I can give you?" he asked, with a faint sigh, as if her indifference had suggested the impotence of riches.

"You are too good. I think not. I have everything in the world I care for."

Mr. Champion and his wife had the handsomest suite of rooms in the hotel, and Gerard had taken the next best. Between them they absorbed an entire floor in one wing of the great white barrack. They were thus in a manner secluded from the vulgar herd, and Gerard seemed as if staying on a visit with the Champions, since he was invited to use their salon as freely as his own, while he dined with them five days out of seven. He had his own servants with him, valet and groom, and he began to think that he too wanted a secretary, if it were only to write every day to architect or builder, urging them to expedite their work. He was eager to be installed in his own house—eager to accumulate pictures and statuary, curios, books, plate—to taste the feverish rapture of spending his money. If, as Dr. South had hinted, his life was likely to be shorter than the average life, there was all the more reason why he should spend his money freely, why he should crowd into a few years all the enjoyment that wealth can buy. Yet even here there was peril. He had been warned against all fierce emotions. To prolong that feeble life of his he must live temperately, and never pass the limits of tranquil domestic life.

It seemed to him that with this view he could hardly have done better for himself than in that compact which he had made with Edith Champion. In his relations with her there was no fiery agitation, no passionate impatience. He loved her, and had loved her long—perhaps a little more passionately when his love was a new thing, but not, he assured himself, more devotedly than he loved her now. He was secure of her love, secure also of her virtue, for had she not known how to maintain her self-respect during this long apprenticeship to platonic affection? Their lives would glide smoothly on, till James Champion, cared for and kindly treated to the last hour of his existence, should drop gently into the grave, decently mourned for such space of time and in such manner as the world exacts of well-bred widows. And then Edith and he would be married, and would assume that commanding position in

London and continental society which only a husband and wife whose views and culture exactly harmonise can ever attain. The prospect was in every way agreeable, and he could look forward to it without any quickened throbbing of his tired heart. Dr. South had called it a tired heart—a heart with which there was nothing organically wrong, only the languor left by the strain of over-work. He could sit in the hotel garden taking his sun-bath, and placidly admiring the perfection of Edith's profile, shadowed by the broad-leaved Leghorn hat, or the delicate arch of her instep in the high-heeled Parisian shoe, so eminently adapted for sitting still.

And thus the days went by at Mont Oriol, and nothing broke the monotony of luxurious idleness—a life such as Guinevere and her knights and ladies may have led at Camelot, when things were beginning to go rather badly at the Court of King Arthur, a life of sensuous pleasures and dormant intellectuality—a life in which people talked about books, but rarely read, affected a profound interest in advanced philanthropy, yet would have hardly risen from an easy-chair to save a fellow-man from ruin, a life in which heart and brain were only half awake, while the desire of the eye and the delight of the ear were paramount.

Pleasant as this holiday time was, Gerard rejoiced when it came to an end and he was free to return to London and look after his architect and builder. October was half gone when he arrived in his old shabby quarters near the church, at which his new valet—*vice* Dodd, superannuated—looked with contempt. The builders were hard at work in the house near the Park—Stamford House it had been called, but it was to be known henceforward by the name of its new owner. The builders were working by night as well as by day, by the aid of the electric light which was already installed. Gerard went to see them at work on the night after his return, and to his fancy there seemed something demoniac in the vision of these men swarming up and down ladders and balancing themselves upon narrow cornices in the cold clear light, and amidst the noise of many hammers.

They were a little behind with their work, the clerk of the works admitted, but there had been a difficulty in getting good men, and he was determined only to have first-rate workmen upon a job of such importance.

"Depend upon it, you'll be satisfied with the result, sir," he said. "The alteration of the façade has been a very difficult job, I can assure you. It isn't like beginning fair, you see. We have had to adapt the loggia to the existing front, and to avoid all appearance of patchwork. You'll be pleased when it's done."

"Perhaps I shall, if I live long enough to see it," answered Gerard, fretfully. "But judging by the present aspect of the house, I may be in my grave before it is finished."

"Oh, indeed, sir, we are more forward than you may think. The interior decorations are going on simultaneously. Things will come together in a day. The architect is thoroughly satisfied with the way the work is being done."

"No doubt; but the architect is not waiting to occupy the house, as I am."

He stayed there for nearly two hours betwixt midnight and morning, going about with the clerk of the works amidst all the litter and confusion of painters and carpenters, glaziers and plumbers, a veritable pandemonium, in which fiends were passing to and fro with cauldrons of boiling lead, and pots of acrid-smelling paint, a scene of discordant noises, shrill whistling from divers whistlers, sounds of plane and hammer, chisel and augur. It was out of this chaos his ideal mansion was to come, fresh as the world when the Creator saw that it was well.

He went there again next day with Mrs. Champion and her niece. She had at least a dozen nieces, and took up one or another as capriciously as she chose her gloves. Roger Larose and the furniture-man were there to meet them, and they all went over the house by daylight, peering into every corner, and discussing every detail, the mantelpieces, the stoves, the windows and window-seats, moulding, panelling, painting, carving, glass stained, and glass Venetian, Bohemian, Belgian.

Aunt and niece were both agreed that house and decorations would be quite too lovely. They did not attempt any more technical opinion. The niece, Miss Flora Bellinger, went about with her petticoats held up and her shoulders and elbows contracted, murmuring, "Lovely, lovely," to everything, even the sink in the housemaid's pantry, and in deadly fear of wet paint.

One suggestion Mrs. Champion ventured to make:

"Be sure you have plenty of corners," she said to Mr. Larose; "quaint, odd angles, don't you know—pretty little nooks that can be made Moorish, or Japanese, or Dutch, or Old English, just as one's fancy may suggest."

"My dear lady, you see the rooms," replied the architect gravely, "and you see the angles. I cannot alter the shape of rooms that are practically finished."

"That's a pity. I thought you could have thrown in corners. The rooms are utterly lovely—but there are no cosy nooks."

"I see, Mrs. Champion, that you hanker after a Flemish style, which has now become the property of the restaurants. Were you ever in the Ricardi Palace at Florence?"

"Yes, I know it well."

"I don't think you saw any quaint nooks or odd angles there, although you may find as many as you like in Earl's Court."

"Yes, I suppose they are getting common," sighed Mrs. Champion; "everything becomes common—everything pretty and fantastical, at least."

After that searching inspection, which involved certain small emendations and final decisions, Gerard Hillersdon told himself that he would look no more upon his house until it was finished, except those two rooms which he was to furnish after his own devices. It would worry him too much to go there day after day only to see how slowly the British workman can work. Mrs. Champion and her husband were to spend November and December at Brighton, so Gerard went down to the Rectory, where mother and sister were full of delight when he told them that he had come to stay for at least a month.

He found his family rejoicing over the good fortune of Mr. Cumberland, who had been promoted from a rural curacy to a London living. The stipend was modest, but the parish was extensive, and included one of the poorest districts in the great city—a labyrinth of narrow streets and alleys lying between the churches of St. Anne and St. Giles. It was in just such a parish as this that John Cumberland desired to labour. He was at heart a Socialist. He believed in the stringent rights of the poor and the responsibilities of the rich, and saw in the increasing luxury and costliness which marked the existence of the upper classes the sign of a degenerate people and a profligate age. In his new parish of St. Lawrence, Wardour Street, there were all those elements of life which most deeply interested him. It was a parish of mixed classes and divers nationalities, the chosen haunt of the impecunious exile, the Nihilist and the Fenian, the Carbonaro and the Karl Marxian. It was a parish peopled by the intelligent British workman, the self-educated and self-sufficient mechanic. Great blocks of buildings, erected at different periods, and showing different stages of architectural and sanitary improvement, cast their mighty shadows over the lower level of slates and tiles that roofed the courts and alleys of the past. These huge edifices were model lodging-houses, more or less admirable in their arrangements, and at their worst a considerable advance upon the hovels that surrounded them.

Here, too, in the parish of St. Lawrence the Martyr, was the well-known club for women who earned their bread by the sweat of their brow—needlewomen of all kinds, factory girls of divers industries, from jam and pickle making in Soho to filling cartridges in the Gray's Inn Road—a club which was the centre of civilisation, improvement, and all refining influences, for hundreds of hard-working girls and women, and which had flourished exceedingly under the fostering care of Lady Jane Blenheim, a woman who devoted her life to good works. John Cumberland was delighted at the prospect of having Lady Jane for his counsellor and ally; nor was he in any way disheartened by the knowledge that he and his young wife were to begin their wedded life in a district which smart people would call "impossible." The Vicarage of St. Lawrence was a substantially built early Georgian house, in Greek Street, a street which was occupied by the very cream of modish society in the days of Chesterfield and Bolingbroke, but which is now chiefly distinguished by French laundries and restaurants, Italian grocery, and foreign conspirators of various types and nationalities.

The living was worth something under five hundred a year, but the Rector of Helmsleigh knew by experience how much of a clergyman's income has to be sacrificed to the claims of his parish, and how little may be left for his own maintenance. He had, therefore, questioned the wisdom of allowing his daughter to marry a man whose only independent means consisted of a legacy of railway shares from a spinster aunt, which shares produced about a hundred and twenty pounds a year. He was also averse from the idea of Lilian's lines being set in the smoky atmosphere of Soho.

"Let Jack Cumberland dree his weird under the shadow of Cross and Blackwell, and take his fill of work in a poor parish for the next two or three years," said the Rector, with his genial air, cheerily disposing of other people's lives. "By that time he will have made himself a reputation as a powerful preacher, and something better will turn up—a fat living in a nice part of the country, where my pet can have her garden and glebe meadows."

"Indeed, father, I don't want a garden, and a sleepy, idle life, such as—as the very best people are content to lead in the country," answered Lilian, eagerly. "I would much rather work hard with Jack in a poor parish like St. Lawrence."

"Ah, that is the way with young people," sighed the Rector, whose favourite maxim for the last twenty years had been that of Parson Dale, *Quieta non movere*, "they are always wanting to go out and fight dragons. If they are not rampant for pleasure, tennis, dances, hunting, why then they are rampant for work. The girls want to be hospital nurses, the boys want to be East End curates, or to go to Africa, or, at the first whisper of some purposeless, unnecessary war, they rush off to enlist. Young people have no idea how good it is to take life quietly, and make the most of one's allotted span."

The young people in this instance were so resolute, and their elders so yielding, that it was finally agreed that Lilian and Jack should be married a year after he had read himself in at the church of St. Lawrence. A year would give him time to settle down in his parish, to put a good many crooked things straight, and get into a groove in which his life and Lilian's might move quietly along, without over much worry or emotion. He would have time to furnish those gloomy old panelled rooms which to Lilian's eyes were beautiful, fraught with delightful memories of patch and powder, lovely ladies in rustling brocade sacques, daintily emerging from their sedan chairs to trip lightly up the stone steps, while their running footmen quenched their torches under the iron extinguishers. The panelled walls, the iron extinguishers were left, but who now has a running footman? Duchess Georgina had six, six splendid over-fed creatures in plush and bullion, silk stockinged, powdered, beautiful, six to run in the mud beside her chair, and hover about her and protect her when she alighted. Lilian was charmed at the thought of the old-fashioned London house, and the rapture of picking up quaint old cabinets and secretaires, and tables with claw and ball feet, to furnish withal. She was in no wise depressed by the notion of a year's engagement. This time of courtship was such a happy time—a season of tenderest chivalry, and pretty trivial gifts, and small innocent pleasures which needed much planning beforehand, season of letters perpetual and unending, letters about nothing, yet so delightful to the recipient, letters written at midnight, letters pencilled hastily in the early morning—nay, one letter written in the vestry, which seemed a kind of sacrilege, but was not less esteemed on that account.

"There are hours in which you are my religion, and I almost forget that I have any other," said Jack, when his sweetheart reproached him for that vestry letter.

Mr. Cumberland was still doing duty as curate at Helmsleigh when Gerard came on the scene. He was to assume his new duties shortly after Christmas.

"Then Lilian can come and keep house for me," said Gerard, "and then she will be able to see her lover every day, and I can help in the furnishing."

"Oh, please don't," cried his sister. "You would spoil all our fun. You have too much money. You would just say to an upholsterer, 'furnish,' and he would come with his men and take possession of—our house," with a shy smile, and a blushing glance at her lover, "and everything would be done splendidly, expensively, and as the upholsterer liked, not as we like. No, dear Gerard, we are going to pick up our furniture bit by bit, and it is to be all as old as that wicked old George who shut up his poor wife in the Castle at Alden. We have begun already. We bought a walnut-wood bureau with brass handles, in Exeter, the other day—so old—oh, so old—and all genuine."

"Except the handles," said Cumberland, laughing; "I shouldn't like to answer for the handles. They look very like having been put on last week."

"They have been newly lacquered, sir. You are dreadfully ignorant. The dear old drawers and pigeon holes and secret recesses smell of old papers—lost wills—marriage certificates upon which great fortunes depend—love letters—sermons preached a hundred and fifty years ago. That bureau is a romance in walnut-wood, and if you could see the dirty old shop in which we found it——"

"I am answered," said Gerard; "the wealth of the Indies cannot give you half the pleasure you will find in bargain-hunting in dirty shops. Perhaps when you have found that most of your treasures are spurious, and that you could have got better and truer antiques for less money at a West End upholsterer's, your bargain hunting will lose some of its zest. I bide my time."

It amused him a little, and interested him deeply to see how small a significance his wealth had in the eyes of his sister, as compared with her lover and her own outlook of genteel poverty in a crowded London parish. For this girl, deep in love with an enthusiast, and sharing his enthusiasm, wealth had no fascination.

"You are too good," she told her brother, when they two were alone, and he pressed her to accept a handsome dowry, "but I shouldn't care to have money settled upon me, for fear Jack should feel humiliated. He cannot afford to settle anything; and I shouldn't like the settlement to be onesided."

"But, my dear girl, that is all nonsense."

"Perhaps it is, only please let me have my own way. We are sure to want your help by-and-by, to build schools, or to improve the church, perhaps. There is sure to be some pressing want in the parish, and then we will appeal to you. And in the meantime, as we are to live among poor people, it is good for us to be poor. We shall be able to sympathise with them, and understand them all the better."

Gerard argued no longer, but he meant that his sister should be dowered by him, all the same. She should not be poor, while he was inordinately rich. The settlement would have to be made. In the meantime he was glad that the marriage was delayed a year, so that he might have this bright young creature for his companion in the new home whose splendour he thought of sometimes with a thrill of apprehension. Would he not feel lonely in that large house until he could bring a wife home, and all his wife's feminine surroundings of cousins and bosom friends, with their flutter, and fuss, and life, and movement? A house occupied only by men has always a gloomy atmosphere. There lacks the colour and frou-frou of women's brighter raiment.

He pleaded with his mother that she should spare Lilian to him, until she should be claimed by a husband, and the mother, who dearly loved this wayward son—her poet as she had called him in the fond exaggeration of maternal love, intoxicated by his juvenile success in literature—could refuse him nothing. She would have to part with her only daughter in a little time. That was inevitable. The light-hearted daughter of the house, she whose heaviest task hitherto had been the making of a new frock for a smart-garden-party, she whose only sorrows had been the sorrows of others, was now to go out into the thick of the fight, and bear her own burdens as wife and mother, and carry on her shoulders and in her heart the care of a man's life, his mistakes and disappointments, his failures and difficulties, all his frailties and feebleness, physical and mental. These were to be her burden, and these she must carry patiently to the end, or else go out into the dismal company of faithless, dishonoured wives. The Rector of Helmsleigh had been a good husband, as husbands go, yet his wife looked at her fair young daughter, sitting at the piano under the soft lamp-light, accompanying her lover's song, very much as Abraham may have looked at Isaac on the eve of the intended sacrifice.

"It will not be a parting for you and Lilian," pursued Gerard, intent upon his purpose, "for I shall expect you to spend all the best part of the year at Hillersdon House. We will do the London season together. We will drink the cup of pleasure to the dregs."

"My dearest boy, what do I know of the season? I should be out of my element among the people you call smart. When Barbara Vere rattled on about her great parties, and her lords and ladies, I felt as if she was talking an unknown language. I can get on very well with our county people here—we are county ourselves, you know—but I dare say I should hardly feel comfortable with them if I met them in London, in all their London finery."

"Dear mother, you underrate the adaptability of your plastic sex. I can conceive my father feeling bored by town gaieties, and pining for his poultry-yard, his county papers, and his infallible barometer. He has got into the rustic groove, and might suffer by transplantation—but you would enjoy the quick, eager existence, and intellectual friction."

"I certainly should delight in meeting intellectual people—Tennyson, Browning, Tyndall, and Owen for instance," said Mrs. Hillersdon, as if a little group of that kind were to be met at every evening party in the season.

"And the music and the pictures," suggested Gerard.

"Yes, indeed, there is so much to see and to hear in London. When we have gone up to Limmer's for a fortnight the time has been all too short. A Greenwich dinner, which I shall always consider a sad waste of time and money, an afternoon at Richmond, perhaps a day at Ascot, and luncheon parties in London with too hospitable friends. The fortnight goes by in a rush, and one seems to have seen nothing."

"It shall be otherwise when you are with me, mother. We will go about in a leisurely way, and see everything. I know my little London, all that she is and all that she is not, and I will teach you how to get the best she can give you. I wonder what you will think of my house."

"I am sure it will be perfect. You have such good taste."

"Fond flatterer. I have nothing but money, which can buy the educated taste of other people."

* * * * *

Gerard spent Christmas at the Rectory, partly because his mother was especially anxious that he should be with her at that season of family gatherings, and partly because his latest letters from builder, architect, and furniture man promised the completion of the house on the last day of the year. There had been a good deal of prevarication in former letters, and there had been various excuses for delay—excuses chiefly of a climatic nature, the elements seeming to have conspired against the completion of that particular house. Frost may have told Fog that the house belonged to a new man, and that the new man ought to wait. Could he not be content with the dog-kennel in which he had lived hitherto, forsooth?

But Roger's last letter was specific. The builder pledged himself that his men should clear out of the house on the morning of the 31st. Decorators, carpet-layers, needlewomen should vanish from the scene, silently as goblins at cockcrow, and on New Year's Eve men and women, builders' minions and upholsterers' minions, were to feast together on a grand supper at the "Bell and Horns," in the Brompton Road.

Edith Champion had undertaken what she called the mounting of the establishment. She had secured an all-accomplished housekeeper, and a clever man cook, who did not accept the situation until assured of three underlings in the kitchen, a private sitting-room, and the use of a brougham for his marketing. She had chosen butlers and footmen, and had devised a livery for the latter—darkest green, with black velvet collar and facings, black velvet small clothes, and black silk stockings. "It is a sombre livery," she wrote; "but the powder relieves it, and I think you will like the effect. Your men will wear silk stockings always, that is a point, and I have told your housekeeper to be very particular about their shoe-buckles. Their shoes will be made in Bond Street, and will cost thirty shillings a pair. Forgive me for troubling you with these details; but with your wealth your only chance of distinction is by nicety in minor points. Your house will be simply perfect. I went through the reception-rooms yesterday. The ceilings are painted in the style of the Ricardi Palace—a banquet in Olympus. Cobalt predominates in the drapery of the goddessess, who, although

Rubensesque, are quite unobjectionable. The effect is brilliant, and harmonises admirably with the subdued amber and russet of the brocade hangings and chair covers. I long for you to see your house now all is coming together. I engaged your Major Domo yesterday—a chance such as rarely falls in the way of a *nouveau riche.* He was fifteen years with Lord Hamperdonne, to whom he was guide, philosopher, and friend, rather than servant. It was he who rescued Hamperdonne from that odious engagement with Dolores Drumio, the Spanish dancer. He has a genius for organising every kind of entertainment; and if he and your *chef* can only work harmoniously your establishment will go on velvet. You will see that I am not engaging many servants. Parton will be house steward, groom of the chambers, and butler, with an under-butler and two footmen, a lad for cellar work, and a house messenger, so that your stablemen may never be called away from their work. For a bachelor, I think this personnel, with half a dozen women, quite sufficient. Anything further would mean display, rather than usefulness, and I'm sure you don't desire that."

"How wise she is!" thought Gerard, as he read this letter for the second time. "How delightful to have to deal with an accomplished woman of the world instead of a sentimental girl; and what a wife she will make for a man in my position, by-and-by, when poor Champion's time has come! Beautiful, well-born, and full of tact and social knowledge. Could any man desire a more delightful companion?" Of her husband, Mrs. Champion wrote in a melancholy strain. Mont Oriol had done him very little good. He had allowed his work and his worries to follow him to the valleys of Auvergne. He had not taken that absolute rest which the doctors had so strenuously urged, and he was considerably worse than he had been in the summer. The specialist who had seen him then now talked of "Stock Exchange spine," which Edith feared was some kind of mental ailment. Her husband was depressed and restless, and there was an idea of sending him to St. Leonards till the end of the winter with a trained attendant, as well as his valet.

"If he goes, I shall go with him," Mrs. Champion concluded, with the air of a Roman wife. "I must not allow pleasure or inclination to interfere with my duty to him. I should have infinitely preferred any part of the Riviera—even Mentone—to St. Leonards, which I detest; but it will be some advantage to be near you, as I dare say you will be too much taken up with your new house to go to the South this year. By the way, have you any idea of the other

House? A seat in Parliament would give you *kudos*, and our party wants all the strength it can get."

"*Pas si bête*," thought Gerard. "I am not going to waste any portion of my scanty life in an ill-ventilated, malodorous, overcrowded bear-garden!"

He was to go to London on New Year's Day, his sister accompanying him, delighted at the idea of the journey, and all the more delighted since John Cumberland had made it convenient to travel on the same day, and by the same train. He preached his farewell sermon on St. Stephen's Day, and drew tears from many of his hearers by the pathos of his farewell. His congregation knew that the pathos was real, and that he had really loved them, and worked for them as only love can work. Gerard had been glad to spend Christmas at home, for his mother's sake; but despite his affection for both parents, and his tender regard for the associations of childhood and early youth, the small domestic pleasures and twaddling recurrences to past years, the fuss about the home-grown turkey and the home-cured ham—ham cut from a pig of which the Rector talked as of a departed friend—the church decorations, the parochial festivities, the mothers' meetings, coal and blanket distributions, and exhibition of Christmas cards, bored him excessively. In the country life goes round like a wheel, and nothing but death or calamity can change the circle of infinitesimal events. In London there is always something new to be done or to be heard of—new fashions, new scandals, the unexpected in some form or other.

Gerard was consumed by the feverish impatience of the "child who has new robes and may not wear them." That last week at the Rectory seemed illimitable. He wanted to be on the strong tide of life—to feel the swift river carrying him along—and here he seemed to be sitting on a vast stretch of level sand, from which he but faintly saw the distant flood. Yet this was precisely the kind of existence he had been advised to lead—a life of placid monotony, passionless, uneventful.

On his last night at the Rectory, and in one of his last talks with his mother, she asked him in a casual way if he had seen or heard anything more of Hester Davenport.

"No; I have not tried to find her. The attempt seemed too hopeless; and after all, the face I saw was more a dream than a reality; yet I know it was Miss Davenport's face."

"I don't understand, Gerard——"

"No, dearest," interrupted her son. "I must say to you as

Hamlet said to his fellow-student, 'There are more things in heaven and earth than' you—or I—can quite account for. You must come to London, mother. London is full of revelations for any one who has been buried alive for half a lifetime in a rustic Rectory. You will hear of new sciences, new religions. You will find Buddha placed shoulder to shoulder with Christ. You will find people discrediting the four evangelists and pinning their faith upon 'materializations.' You will find the cultured classes despising Dickens and making light of Thackeray, in favour of the last smart young man who has written a smart story of three or four pages in a smart magazine. The old order is always changing. London is for ever new, for ever young. You will feel twenty years younger there than you do here."

"Younger under a smoky sky, Gerard! Younger in a place where one must put on one's gloves before one can venture to pick a rose! Younger among crowds of rushing people and over-worked cab-horses, and sickly town babies, whose poor little faces make one miserable! I shall be glad to be with you, dear; but I love this sleepy old Rectory better than the finest house in Park Lane or Grosvenor Square."

Gerard did not try to combat these benighted notions. His own face was set Londonwards early next morning, and he and Lilian were installed in the new house before afternoon tea. They had explored every room, and were ready to receive Mr. Cumberland and Mrs. Champion at eight o'clock to a friendly New Year dinner—a snug *parti carré* at a round table in the breakfast-room, one side of which was all window, opening into a winter-garden, where a fountain played in a low marble basin, encircled with camellias and palms.

The shaded lamps gave a soft and tempered light. The colouring in this room was subdued and cool, pale bluish green for the most part, the walls the colour of a hedge-sparrow's egg, relieved by the warm sepia and Indian red of a few choice etchings. These, with a wonderful arrangement of peacock's feathers and celadon Sèvres vases over the chimney-piece, were the only ornaments.

"No quaint corners or ingle-nook, nothing Moorish or Japanese in all the house; no copper or brass, or any one of the things I delight in," sighed Mrs. Champion. "Mr. Larose has been horridly tyrannical. Yet I must confess he has succeeded. Your house is a creation."

The service was perfection, every servant eager to please the new master, and the dinner was worthy of a company of gourmets, rather than of these four, who cared very little what they ate, and who were, some of them, too much absorbed in their own thoughts and feelings to know what they were eating. An oyster *soufflé* which would have evoked praises from Lucullus or Lord Alvanley, went round without comment or commendation. But if Mr. Hillersdon's friends did not talk about the dinner there was plenty of talk about other things. Edith Champion was full of offers to take Lilian to her particular friends and her favourite tradespeople, during the few days she had left before going to St. Leonards with her invalid husband.

"I want you to go to Madame St. Evremonde for your gowns," said Mrs. Champion. "She is the only woman in London who knows where a waist ought to begin and end—excuse my talking chiffons, Mr. Cumberland, we ought to keep that kind of thing for after dinner—but it is such a treat for a battered woman of the world like me to have a neophyte to instruct. I should like to take you to my shoemaker, too, for he is rather a difficult person to deal with; and if he don't take to you he won't even try to fit your foot."

"If that is the way of London shoemakers I should buy my boots ready-made at the Stores," said Cumberland, grimly.

"Are there ready-made shoes?" Mrs. Champion asked innocently. "How terrible! I know some people buy gloves in shops ready-made; but ready-made shoes must be too dreadful. They can't fit anybody."

"Their particular merit is that they fit everybody," said Cumberland. "It is only a question of size."

"Oh, if people don't care about shape or style, or whether they have an instep or not, I suppose a ready-made boot or shoe would do," said Mrs. Champion, taking a philosophical tone. "They would keep out the wet. Only if one is to take a proper pride in one's clothes one must have them from the best makers. I could be content to go through life in a tweed gown; but it must be made by Redfern or Felix."

"I'm afraid your dressmaker would be a great deal too smart and too expensive for me, Mrs. Champion," Lilian answered quietly.

"Too smart, too expensive—for Mr. Hillersdon's sister! Why, you will be expected to dress as well as the Princess of Wales. Your toilette will be under the fierce light that beats upon a millionaire. You will have to dress up to this house."

"I should be sorry to dress in a way that would be unsuited to a country clergyman's daughter."

"Or to a London clergyman's promised wife," said John Cumberland, stealing a tender look at the fair young face from under his strongly-marked brows. Those brief looks meant a world of love to Lilian.

"Let her dress as plainly or as smartly as she pleases, Mrs. Champion," said Gerard, gaily; "but if Madame St. Evremonde is the best dressmaker in London to Madame St. Evremonde she must go. While you are in this house, Lilian, you must look your prettiest for my sake; but when you migrate to Greek Street you may wear a Quakeress's poke bonnet, or a Sister of Charity's hood."

"Greek Street," exclaimed Mrs. Champion, in her most childish manner. "Where is Greek Street?"

CHAPTER X.

"STILL ONE MUST LEAD SOME LIFE BEYOND."

THE dull beginning of the year, before the opening of Parliament and the gradual awakening of London, passed like a dream. The delight of installation in the home that he had created for himself, and the novel sensation of squandering money were enough to keep Gerard Hillersdon occupied and happy; while Lilian was divided between two absorbing duties. On the one side she had her brother, whom she dearly loved, and all the pomps and vanities of this wicked world; and on the other side she had her future husband, now fully established as Vicar of St. Lawrence's, and wanting her counsel and co-operation in every undertaking. "I want the parish to be as much your parish as mine, Lilian," he said. "I want your mind and your hand to be in all things, great and small."

So on one day Lilian was trudging up and down some of the dirtiest alleys in West Central London, deliberating and advising as to a Night Refuge for women and children, and on the next she was with her brother at Christie's, giving her opinion about a Reynolds or a Raffaelle.

Gerard was profuse in his offers of money, would, indeed, from his own purse have supplied all the needs of St. Lawrence's; but Jack Cumberland exercised a restraining influence, and would only accept moderate benefactions—a hundred pounds for the new Refuge, a hundred for the Working Man's Institute, and fifty each for the Magdalen Rescue Society and Dispensary, two hundred for the schools; five hundred pounds in all.

"It seems absurd that you should want money for anything while I have ever so much more than I want," remonstrated Gerard, toying with his open cheque-book.

"You shall do something more for us a year or two hence, when you have familiarised yourself with your fortune, and have acquired a sense of proportion," said Cumberland, smiling at his eagerness. "At present you are like a child with a new box of toys, who thinks that he can distribute them among his playfellows and yet have the boxful for himself. When you better know what money means you shall be our benefactor on a larger scale—always supposing you are still in the humour. In the meantime that five hundred pounds is a prodigious God-send, and will help us along capitally. I never hoped for such an excellent start."

"I believe the fellow wants to keep his parish poor," Gerard said afterwards, in a confidential talk with his sister.

"He doesn't want to sponge upon your fortune, Gerard, and he is afraid of pauperising his people by doing too much."

"Pauperising? Ah, that's always the cry nowadays; but it would take as long a head as Henry Brougham's to find out where help ends and pauperisation begins. If the State were to feed the Board School children, yea, even with one substantial meal per diem, we are told that we should be teaching the parents to look to State aid, and to squander their wages on drink. I dare say it might work that way in a good many cases; but if, on the other hand, we could succeed in rearing a healthy race the craving for drink might be lessened in the next generation."

Hillersdon House was a success. Society flocked to the millionaire as flies go to the honey-pot. The Northern farmer's advice to his son is one of the chief points in social ethics. We all like to go where money is. There is a fascination in wealth and the luxury it can buy that only a Socrates can resist, and even Socrates went to rich men's houses, and smartened his rough attire for the feast. Society, which had always approved of Gerard Hillersdon, was on tiptoe to know what he would do with his money; that portion which envied him his wealth opining that he would run through this vast fortune in a year or two, while everybody had his own theory as to how he ought to spend it.

As a social adviser there could be no one better than Roger Larose, architect, poet, painter, and man of fashion; a man who seemed to have founded his style and manners upon the long-forgotten bucks of those golden days before the Regency, when George, Prince of Wales, was young.

"I call Roger Larose the Sleeping Beauty," said Reuben Gambier, "for he looks as if he had fallen asleep in some corner of the Cocoa Tree Club, at the close of the eighteenth century, in a bag-wig, a puce coat, and a frilled shirt, and as if he had never become reconciled to modern costume."

Larose was an amiable enthusiast, full of pleasant whimsicalities, and Gerard, who was naturally indolent, allowed him full scope as a counsellor.

"You must give parties," said Larose; "it is useless having a fine house if you bury yourself alive in it! You had better have built yourself a mausoleum—not half a bad idea, by-the-by. If any dear old gentleman ever leaves me a few millions, I will build myself a pyramid, like Cheops, and live in it till I am ready for the embalmers—a pyramid in which I will receive only a few chosen friends—a pyramid in which I will give choice little dinners to those chosen ones. Yes, my dear Gerard, you must give parties—breakfasts, luncheons, dinners, musical evenings. It is written in the stars that you are to provide a good many of the amusements of this ensuing season. I hope you like the notion of being a social centre, Miss Hillersdon?" said Roger, turning to Lilian, with an insinuating smile. Not a handsome man, by any means, this Larose, but with a delicate pallor, attenuated features, and a languid smile which women pronounced sympathetic.

"It is rather alarming, but I want Gerard to be happy and amused," Lilian replied brightly; "and Mr. Cumberland will help us to receive people. He was immensely popular in Devonshire."

"My dear young lady, Devonshire isn't London—but, of course, Mr. Cumberland is charming, and I hear people are going to St. Lawrence's to hear his sermons."

"People!" exclaimed Lilian; "why, the church is crammed every Sunday at all the services."

"Ah; but I mean people—people like Lord Wordsworth, and Mr. Lemaitre, the actor; people like Lady Hyacinth Pulteney—people who criticise and talk. If that goes on, Mr. Cumberland will be an acquisition at your parties. But, my dear Gerard," pursued Roger, solemnly, "the great point is food. People will go to you to be fed. Feed them. You will have a luxury of flowers, of course; Mrs. Smith—the Mrs. Smith—will decorate your rooms and dinner-table. People expect the lust of the eye to be gratified; but that is, after all, a minor point. Your iced asparagus, ortolans, quails, plovers' eggs—those are the essentials."

"And, as a reward for my hospitality, my house will be called the Restaurant Hillersdon, or Café Gerard. People will eat, drink, and be merry—all at my expense."

"No, my dear fellow. You will not be laughed at. You have not made your money out of Russian hides or American manures. You do not come to us with inadequate aspirates, fresh from the Australian backwoods. You are not laboriously conning the alphabet of civilised life. You are one of us. You have graduated in all our follies and vices. You are an adept in all our conventionalities—our mispronunciations, affectations, and jargon of all kinds. You will do. You are not a new man. You are only that nice boy, Gerard Hillersdon, plus two millions."

Hillersdon, perhaps, hardly needed this assurance. He might affect the misanthrope, and preach as bitterly as Timon in his cave. He loved his fellow-men just well enough to enjoy bringing them about him, and to feel that splendour would be a poor thing if there were nobody to admire it. Again, the science of entertaining was in itself full of interest. Every man who has mixed ever so little in society believes that he can give a dinner—assort his guests and revise a *menu*—better than any one else. Hillersdon was not without that delusion, and society fostered it by praise and appreciation. His luncheons, which were more frequent at Hillersdon House than any other form of entertainment, were voted perfect—perfect as to the choice of guests, the harmonious blending of divers opinions, professions, crazes—perfect as to all material elements—the *menu* never too elaborate or too long—the choicest luxuries given with an air of simplicity which disguised their costliness. The popularity of his luncheons encouraged Mr. Hillersdon to revive a somewhat exploded form of hospitality. He began a series of

Sunday breakfasts, to which only those were bidden whose wider and less orthodox views made the morning service of the Anglican Church a purely optional matter—to go or not to go, as the trained choir or the sensational preacher might invite;—unholy breakfasts, at which the literary agnostic or the disciple of the latest fad aired his or her opinions; breakfasts, the very thought of which made Lilian shudder, as she passed the breakfast-room door on her way to the victoria, which was to carry her to that little heaven below, where Jack Cumberland's choir of working-men, trained by himself, were to sing, and where Jack was to preach one of his heart-stirring sermons. She heard the voices and laughter of her brother's friends as she passed the breakfast-room door, and her heart sank within her at the thought of what small significance Sunday now had in the life of that brother. She loved him, and she began to fear that he had cast in his lot among the unbelievers, among men who ridicule the idea of a Personal God, who can discover nowhere in this universe the necessity for any higher form of being than their own, who think that through illimitable cycles creation has been climbing upwards to its ultimate outcome, Man, who has made gods, and shall unmake them.

"Gerard, dear, is Sunday after Sunday to go by without your going to church?" Lilian asked, one sunny April morning, when she found her brother smoking a cigarette in the winter-garden, and looking idly at the Marechal Niel roses, while the servants in the adjoining room were putting their finishing touches to a breakfast-table laid for eight.

"My darling, I shouldn't be any the better for church, or the church any the better for me. I am a little out of harmony with the Christian idea, just now. Either I have outgrown it, or I am passing through a phase of doubt; but if you really want me to sacrifice to the respectabilities I will go to St. Lawrence with you next Sunday. One of Jack's rousing sermons will do me good. They are capital tonics for a relaxed brain!"

"Years ago you used to go to church every Sunday, and sometimes twice on a Sunday."

"Years ago I was very young, Lilian. I went to church for various reasons—first, to please my mother; and next, because the Rector would have made unpleasant remarks at luncheon if he had missed me from the family pew; next again, because I liked the sleepy old church and the sleepy service, and the familiar faces, and my father's short sensible sermon; and last of all, because I had not begun to think of how much or how little faith in spiritual things there was in me."

"And all that the cleverest people in London can teach you is not to believe," said Lilian, sadly.

"My dear girl, the clever people have very little to do with my disbelief. The change is in myself. It came about as spontaneously and mysteriously as cotton blight on an apple-tree. One day you see the tree flourishing, the leaves clean and full of sap; and the next day they are all curled up and withered, as if a fire had passed over them, and the incipient fruit is eaten of worms."

"The carriage is at the door, ma'am," announced one of those perfectly matched footmen whom Mrs. Champion had selected, magnificent, impassible beings, who looked and moved and spoke as if they had been cradled amidst patrician surroundings.

Lilian drove away in the sunshine, heavy at heart for the brother she loved. She saw him with the illimitable power of wealth, surrounded by all the snares and temptations of a world in which whim and pleasure are the only laws that govern mankind. She saw him cut adrift from the anchor in which she believed, sailing away from the safe harbour of the Christian faith, to the bleak and barren sea of scornful and sullen materialism; a gloomy agnosticism which looks with contempt upon every spiritual instinct, and laughs at every Heavenward aspiration as the delusion of children and fools.

While Lilian drove along Piccadilly, to the sound of various church bells, and past a population setting churchward, Mr. Hillersdon's Sunday visitors were slowly dropping in to the eleven o'clock breakfast—a meal which had but one drawback, according to Roger Larose. It made luncheon an impossibility.

One of the guests of the day, Mr. Reuben Gambier, was a youthful novelist, who had made all vice his province, and whose delight was to shock the susceptibilities of the circulating library. His books were naturally popular, and as in the case of a nervous rider with a restive horse, people were impressed more by the idea of what he might do than of what he had actually done. He was lively and eccentric, and a favourite with Hillersdon and his circle.

"I've brought a particular friend of mine, who tells me he knows you well enough to come without an invitation," said Gambier, entering the winter-garden unannounced, from the adjoining drawing-room into which he had been duly ushered. A low unctuous laugh sounded from the other side of the half-raised portière as he spoke, a laugh which Gerard instantly recognised.

"Your friend is Mr. Jermyn," he said quickly.

"Yes—how did you guess?"

"I heard him laugh; there is nobody else on earth who laughs like that."

"But you think there is some one down there who does," said Gambier, pointing significantly to the ground. "A strange laugh, ain't it? but very cheery—sounds as if mankind were a stupendous joke, and as if Jermyn were in the secret of all the springs that work this little world, and knew when it was going to burst up. I believe he knows more about it all than Sir William Thomson, or any of those scientific swells who tell us what the sun is made of, and how long they can warrant the earth to last."

Jermyn's head appeared under the old brocade curtain—a curtain made from the vestments of Italian priests, the rich spoil of a mediæval sacristy—a curious face seen against the background of purple and gold, clear cut, brilliant in colouring, high narrow brow receding curiously, sharp nose, light grey eyes, and smiling mouth, displaying regular white teeth.

He paused for a moment or two, with the curtain in his hand, looking out of the purple and gold, then with a little gush of laughter came across the marble floor and shook hands with his host.

"Surprised to see me, ain't you, Hillersdon?"

"No; I have only been surprised not to see you. And now answer me a question. Where the devil are those rooms of yours in which you gave me supper on the night after Lady Fridoline's party?"

"What! Have you been hunting me up there?"

"Hunting! Yes, it was a decided case of hunting. I don't think the shrewdest detective in London could find those rooms of yours."

"I dare say not, unless he knew where to look for them. I never tell anybody my address, but I sometimes take a friend home to supper—a man who is too full of himself and his own affairs to observe the way by which he goes."

Another visitor came into the winter-garden, and then Hillersdon went into the next room to receive the rest of the party, which was soon complete.

The ninth guest proved a success. Most people were interested in the Fate-reader, although most people pretended to make very light of his art. That searching gaze of his, looking into a man's soul through his face, had an uncanny influence that fascinated as much as it repelled. He had made such strange hits by those fate-reading prophecies of his, and foretold changes and events in the lives of men, of which those men had themselves no foreshadowing. What was this power which enabled him thus to prognosticate? He called it insight; but the word, though both vague and comprehensive, was not sufficient to explain a gift hitherto the peculiar property of the necromancer and the charlatan—never before exercised airily and gratuitously, by a man who was received in society. Whatever Mr. Jermyn's means might be, whether large or small, he had never been known to make money by the exercise of his occult power.

He was leaving with the rest of Hillersdon's friends before one o'clock, when his host detained him.

"I want to have a quiet talk with you," said Gerard; "we have not met since my altered fortunes."

"True," answered Jermyn, lightly, "but I prophesied the turn in your luck, did I not, old fellow?"

"You hinted at possibilities—you set me on the track of an old memory—that scene in the railway station at Nice."

"Lucky dog. Half the young men in London are green with envy when they talk about you. An instant's peril—and a lifetime of boundless wealth."

"There is no such thing as boundless wealth except in America," said Gerard. "It is a phrase to be used only about a man who owns a silver mine. My income is fixed, and——"

"Limited," cried Jermyn, interrupting; "a decidedly limited income. Is it eighty or ninety thousand a year, or does it run to a hundred? I believe were I in your shoes I should be thinking about economising. I should have a holy horror of the workhouse. One loses all sense of proportion under the weight of two millions."

"There is a good deal of spending in it, certainly, if a man knows how to spend judiciously. Do you like my house?"

"I consider it perfect. You have had the discretion not to follow the prevailing fashion. That is your strong point. You have not gone too far, either, in expense or splendour. You have put on the brake at the right moment."

"Come and see my den," said Gerard.

He led the way to the upper floor, opened a door at the back of the house, and ushered Jermyn into a room with folding doors, opening into a second room. The two rooms exactly reproduced those Inn chambers where he had seen the vision of Hester Davenport. Colour, form, material—all had been carefully copied, Gerard's memory of that night and its surroundings being more vivid than any other memory of his past life. There were the same curtains of sombre velvet, darkest green in the lights, and black in the shadows, the same Oriental carpet, of rich, but chastened, hues, the same, or almost the same, Italian pictures—a Judas by Titian—a wood-nymph by Guido, the same delicately-carved Chippendale secretaire and blackwood cabinet, the same touches of colour amidst the gloom.

"My very rooms! by all that's wonderful!" cried Jermyn. "What a close observer of still life you must be! You have got everything—except me."

"The black marble bust? Yes, that is wanting; but I mean to have that before I have done."

"Well, my dear Hillersdon, imitation is the sincerest flattery, and I feel intensely flattered."

"A whim—a fancy that pleased me for a moment—that is all it means. Those after-midnight hours in your chambers marked the turning-point in my life. I had made up my mind to shoot myself that very night. The pistol was ready loaded in my pistol-case. I had thought it all out, and had made up my mind. God knows how you guessed my secret so readily."

"My dear fellow, your mind was steeped in suicide. There was no secret in the matter—to an observer with the slightest claim to insight. I saw despair, defiance, recklessness, and the gloom which means only one thing—self-destruction."

"And while I was at the opera, listening to the doom of Don Juan, the everlasting type of spendthrift and profligate—while I was sitting in your chambers, the lawyer's letter was lying on my table within a few feet of the pistol-case—the letter that heralded the announcement of millions. That night was like a bad dream—and it was not until many days afterwards that I was able to shake off that dream-feeling, and realise my good luck."

"Good luck, with a vengeance," laughed Jermyn. "You have been lucky in more ways than one—lucky in love as well as in gold; lucky in the fast coming release of the woman you love."

"I don't quite follow you," Gerard said coldly, resenting this allusion, even from a man who professed to know everybody's business.

"Don't pretend to be angry with me for touching upon an open secret. Everybody knows of your devotion to one bright particular star; and everybody will be inclined to congratulate you when the worthy stockbroker gets his order of release. Life can be of very little value to him, poor fellow. I saw him dragged about in a bath-chair on the parade at St. Leonards a month ago, a dismal wreck, and now I am told he is in retreat at Finchley—the beginning of the end."

Gerard smoked his cigarette in silence. The conversation was evidently displeasing to him.

The beginning of the end? Yes, it might be that the end was near; and if it were so, what better could he desire than to marry the woman he had so ardently desired to marry just four years ago; the capable, accomplished woman whom all the town admired, and who was rich enough to be in no wise influenced by his wealth. She was not less beautiful than she had been in her girlhood—more beautiful, rather, with a beauty which was only now ripening to its perfect development—a ruddier gold upon her hair, a finer curve of cheek and throat. People were never tired of telling him that Mrs. Champion was the handsomest woman in London.

"I want to ask you another question," Gerard began, when he had smoked out the cigarette. "Was I utterly mad that night in your rooms, or did I see a vision of a girl at a sewing-machine?"

"You were not mad by any means. Your conversation was both rational and logical. It is quite possible that you saw a vision."

"Produced by some trickery of yours, no doubt. How was it done?"

"If I were master of any of the black arts, do you think I would tell you the secrets of my trade? What if I willed that you should recall the loveliest face you had ever seen? Would that account for the phenomenon, do you think?"

"I don't know; the face was certainly one I had seen before; but I was quite unable to identify it without assistance, therefore one would suppose it had faded out of my mind, and could hardly be willed into vivid actuality by you."

"You make no allowance for the submerged identity—that inner ego beneath the outer husk of existence—that hidden nature which keeps its fancies and thoughts locked in darkness, perhaps for years, to start into light at a touch of a kindred spirit—that mysterious being dormant in us from the dawn of manhood, which only awakens at the call of love, and which is at the root of that other mystery we call love at first sight—love, passionate, all-absorbing, strong as death, born in an hour."

"If not an Adam at his birth he is no love at all," quoted Gerard.

And then he remembered how in the beaten track of life his love of Edith Champion had grown up; how he had met her at dinners, and tennis-parties, and cricket matches, and afternoon teas, and had danced with her three nights a week, and heard her praised by men and women; until gradually, out of these commonplace elements he had come to think her the first necessity of his existence, and to follow her, and devote himself to her. No, there had been nothing romantic there—no mysterious flame, wrapping him round in an instant, sudden, invincible. He loved as men and women love in what is called good society—reasonably, with a love that does not burst bonds, or even violate conventionalities.

He thought a good deal about Edith Champion during that April afternoon, long after Jermyn had left him, and when he was sauntering and dreaming alone in his little grove of lime and chestnut, where the purple leaf buds and newly opening leaves were faintly fanned by a soft west wind, and where, above the interwoven branches, the sky showed deeply blue—one of those peerless spring afternoons which bring with them, in their own fresh youthfulness, a sense of reviving youth in the frame and mind of man—factitious, but delightful while it lasts.

He thought of the woman to whom he had bound himself, and for the first time since he had given her his solemn promise of fidelity he felt the shadow of doubt creeping across that sunlit path which an indulgent Fate, granting him all things to be desired of man, had marked out for him. He told himself that he was one of the spoilt children of Fortune; and he hated himself because, like the spoilt child of nursery story-books, he was inclined to quarrel with his toys.

He had been living amongst men whose master is the spirit that always denies. He had steeped himself in that pessimism of small minds which pervades society, and which is the chosen gospel of the men who profess to be in advance of their fellow-men. A dull, dead hopelessness came down upon him, like a dark cloud, in the midst of this palace of art which he had built for his soul, and the palace seemed no better than a prison-house.

He and Mrs. Champion had met less frequently during the last month, for Edith, who was warm-hearted and kindly natured, despite her essentially modern estimate of life, had deemed it her duty to withdraw in some measure from society, now that her husband was the inmate of a private lunatic asylum. She drove to Finchley three times a week, and spent an hour or two with the invalid, sometimes driving with him in the doctor's capacious landau, while her own horses rested, sometimes walking beside his wheel-chair in the garden, and listening patiently while he rambled confusedly through the Stock Exchange list, from Berthas and Buenos Ayres First Preference to Electric Lighting Companies and Papafuego Loans; the shattered mind retracing trodden paths, and finding pleasure in familiar sounds, though memory was almost a blank. Mr. Champion was placable, satisfied with his surroundings, and expressed no impatience of restraint, nor desire to be taken back to his own house. Indeed, it seemed to his wife that he had forgotten every detail of his past existence, except the shibboleth of the Money Market.

In this dismal state it would have been less than charity to pray for the prolongation of his life. Edith did all in her power, by frequent supervision and by undeviating interest, to secure the patient's well-being. He had his old and trusted servant with him, as a check upon the service of the doctor's attendants. A wife who had loved him passionately could have done no more than Edith was doing.

CHAPTER XI.

"EARTH BEING SO GOOD, WOULD HEAVEN SEEM BEST?"

Perhaps in every life there is one perfect interlude—one long sweet interval set somewhere in the midst of the cares and tribulations of commonplace existence, a period in which trouble and sorrow are unknown, and all the colours of earth and sky are deepened into supernatural beauty. The period of a young girl's engagement to the man of her choice—if she be only single-minded and free from jealous fears—is one of these halcyon days—a time of peace and happiness, the winds and waves of trouble all lying at rest, while the sea-birds, joy and hope, are hatching.

Lilian Hillersdon was steeped in the sunlight and the music of that enchanting time. The man to whom she had plighted her life seemed to realise her highest ideal of manly excellence. He satisfied every need of her nature.

She was deeply religious, and she found in her future husband a faith that could apprehend and discuss every theory and doubt of the age, and yet stand strong as a tower. She was tender-hearted, benevolent, sympathetic, taking the sufferings of humanity as a portion of her own life, an ever-present sorrow in the midst of her own joy, and she found in John Cumberland a pity as tender as her own, and a benevolence of a far wider grasp. She could look up to him with meek reverence, as the women of old looked up to their mailed warriors, the men who went out to the unknown land to fight for the sepulchre of their Lord. She could revere him, and yet be utterly happy and light-hearted in his companionship, for his religion was, like Kingsley's, the gospel of cheerfulness, and his most ardent desire was to get the greatest sum of happiness out of this world for himself and others.

The one shadow on her life was the fact that her brother had wantonly shut himself outside that fold where she would have gathered him, with all the precious things of her life; but when she told Jack Cumberland her fears and regrets, he smiled them away, and comforted her with his broad view of a young man's foolishness.

"He is only going through that phase of unbelief which most men have to suffer at some period of their lives," he said. "He will not be prayed or preached into happier ideas. The best thing you and I can do is to leave him alone with his opinions till he finds out how barren and joyless this world is while it means the whole, and how much more comprehensible when we accept it for what it is—a single round upon the ladder of everlasting life. In the meantime, if we can interest him in philanthropic schemes, and the making of Christian England, we shall do a good deal."

"He has promised to make the round of our parish with mother next week," said Lilian.

Mrs. Hillersdon's much-talked-of visit to her son's house had been deferred from one cause and another until April was nearly over; but when that pleasant month was at its best she appeared upon the scene, fresh and smiling as one of the glebe meadows on a sunny morning, and escorted by the Rector, who was to spend only three days in town, before returning westward to visit old friends, and to preach charity sermons at Stroud and at Bath on his way home.

The mother was full of admiration of her son's surroundings, and of the pretty rooms allotted to Lilian, in whose future home she was even more keenly interested. While the Rector was in London, the time was devoted to picture-galleries, concerts, the Park, and society, with the exception of a somewhat hurried survey of Mr. Cumberland's church, vicarage, and schools; but when Mr. Hillersdon had departed upon his round of visits, Lilian took complete possession of her mother, and most of their time was spent in the neighbourhood of Soho, both mother and daughter preferring the simple luncheon provided by Jack Cumberland's plain cook and middle-aged house-maid, in the sober oak-panelled dining-room in Greek Street, to the elaborate inventions of the *chef* at Hillersdon House. The mother was never tired of inspecting her daughter's future home, or of discussing that important question of household linen, with all its scope for variety of material and fine sewing. Most delightful was it also to join Lilian and her lover in their rambles after furniture, books, and curios, wherewith to make the new home more and more homelike—the long drives to queer old brokers' shops to examine some gem of the Chippendale or Sheraton period, entangled in a dusty labyrinth of rubbish. It was curious how to these two women there was more real rapture in a couple of shield-backed chairs of the wheat-ear pattern, unearthed at a remote broker's, than in all the chastened splendour and carefully thought out luxury of Hillersdon House; indeed, there was to Mrs. Hillersdon's simple mind—chastened by long years of tranquil inactivity, sobered by the sorrows of a country parish—some latent feeling of distrust which saddened her in the midst of her son's brilliant surroundings. The change in his fortunes was too sudden and too intense. Unconsciously she echoed the foreboding of Solon when Crœsus exhibited his magnificence before the calm gaze of wisdom. She looked at her son, radiant, animated, leading the conversation at a table where all the guests were men of mark, and all the women beauties or wits, and the flush upon his cheek seemed the hectic of disease, the light in his eye too restless for health. She questioned him with keenest anxiety after one of these brilliant dinners.

"Are you not doing too much, Gerard?" she asked tenderly, "burning the candle of life at both ends?"

"My dear mother, candles were made to burn. If one must be either a flame or a lump of tallow I would rather be the flame—though, no doubt, the unlighted tallow would last a great deal longer. I dare say we seem to be taking life prestissimo after your gentle andante movement in Devonshire. But a man who has no financial cares can stand a little racketing. I used to take a great deal more out of myself in the days when the thought of my tailor's bill, or the image of my landlord's sullen face scowling at me from the half-open door of his back parlour, would come between me and the roses and raptures of a Belgravian ball-room."

"But you have financial cares of another kind, Gerard," answered his mother, in her grave, sweet voice. "You have the disposal of a great fortune—talents for which you must account by-and-by."

"At least, admit that I have not buried them in a napkin—unless it is a dinner napkin," laughed Gerard. "What did you think of that chaufroid of quails? commonplace, I fear; everybody gives quails at this season; the London *menu* becomes as monotonous as that of the Israelites in the wilderness; but the lobster soufflé was iced to perfection."

"Well, I won't try to talk seriously to you to-night; you will only laugh at my old-fashioned ideas. I was brought up to think of riches as something held in trust for one's fellow-creatures."

"You were brought up by the ideal squire and squiress. Yes, I remember my grandfather, who spent every sixpence he could spare from the mere bread and cheese of this life, upon building cottages for his farm labourers and improving the drainage of old-fashioned homesteads, and who was considered a tyrannical landlord by way of recompense—and my grandmother, who tramped up and down muddy lanes, and penetrated foul-smelling cabins, and dressed sore legs, and read to the sick and the blind, and was generally spoken of as an officious, domineering person. Is that the kind of life you want me to lead, mother?"

"No, dear; that was charity upon a small scale, and under difficulties. You can do some great work."

"Only show me what there is for me to do, mother, and I will do it. There is Jack Cumberland yonder, who knows that my surplus income is at his service, but who is too proud to be helped, except in the most insignificant way. Shall I build him a church, or shall I endow an almshouse vast enough to hold all the elderly paupers in his parish? I am ready to give anything or to do anything. If I had any treasure specially dear to my heart, I would surrender it, as Polycrates threw his ring into the sea."

"Ah, dearest, I know your heart is in the right place," said the mother, drawing nearer to the low chair in which her son was reclining, his head lying back upon the amber cushions, his cheek pale with the exhaustion of an animated evening, "but I am grieved to think that in a life which might be so happy—and so useful—there is one sad want."

"What is that, mother?"

"The want of religious convictions. Your sister tells me that you never go to church now, that Christ is no longer your master and your guide, but that you and your friends talk of our blessed Lord as a village philosopher in advance of his age, who unconsciously reproduced the aspirations of Plato and the morals of Buddha. You used to be such a firm believer, Gerard, in the days when you came home from Marlborough, so fresh, and frank, and joyous, and when you and I used to have long Sunday talks together in the woods between luncheon and evening service."

"Ah, mother, those were the days when life was a picture and not a problem; the days before I began to think. I dare say I shall be just as good a believer again by-and-by, when I am old enough to leave off thinking."

CHAPTER XII.

"FOR SUCH THINGS MUST BEGIN SOME DAY."

Mr. Cumberland's most energetic coadjutor in the improvement of his new parish was Lady Jane Blenheim, who had worked in that parish for many years, and who was the head and front of a club and home for working-women, that stood almost within the shadow of the old church of St. Lawrence. Lady Jane had seen vicars and curates come and go. She had seen good and faithful shepherds; she had seen those who scarce knew how to hold a sheep-hook; and she was quick to recognise the right stamp of man in the new incumbent. She entered heartily into all his projected improvements, and gave the hand of friendship to his intended wife; while the Vicar on his side ardently espoused all the enthusiasms of the lady, and lent his musical gifts to those social evenings at the club which it was Lady Jane's delight to inaugurate and superintend. To have as head of the parish a man with a strong brain and a fine baritone voice, supported by an extensive repertoire from both oratorio and opera, was more than she had ever hoped, and she gave the new Vicar her friendship and her counsel in unstinted measure. She was a familiar visitor in the dreariest ground-floor dens, and in the most miserable garrets within the district, and she could tell him a great deal about his neediest parishioners, who, although they frequently shifted from one wretched lodging to another, did not often wander far afield, indeed for the most part revolved within a narrow circle, keeping the old burial-ground of St. Lawrence as their centre, and the church tower as their landmark, a landmark which sometimes served to guide the feet of the Saturday night reveller, too far gone in liquor to read the names of the streets, or recognise minor indications.

To please his sister and her betrothed, Gerard interested himself in Lady Jane's club, and excused himself from an engagement at one of the most distinguished houses in London, where hospitality was a fine art, and where Cabinet Ministers were as common as strawberries in July, in order to eat boiled salmon and roast lamb in Jack Cumberland's dining-room, where Lady Jane and his sister made up the party of four. His mother had gone back to Devonshire, satiated with the sights of London, and loaded with gifts from her millionaire son, costly trifles and new inventions for the comfort or decoration of drawing-room and morning-room, as yet unknown and undreamed of by the shopkeepers of Exeter.

He was not sorry to give up a ducal dinner-party, albeit his card of invitation bristled with Royalties. He had been tolerably familiar with all that London can offer in the way of pleasure and dissipation before he came into his fortune. He stood now upon a higher grade of the steps that approach the throne, but the palace was the same palace, the lights, music, flowers, lovely women were the same that he had looked upon for half a dozen seasons, when he was a nobody. He would have liked to have had a new world—to have had a gate open for him into a land where all things were new. If he had been able to walk more than half a dozen miles without feeling tired, he would have started for Central Africa. He had serious thoughts of Japan, Ceylon, or even Burmah—but while an inner self yearned for untrodden lands, the commonplace, work-a-day self clung to Mayfair and its civilisation—to the great city in which for the man with any pretension to be "smart" there is only one hatter, one boot-maker, tailor, carriage-builder, one kind of letter-paper, one club, and one perfume possible; for be it observed that although the really smart man may be a member of twenty clubs, there is only one that he considers worthy of him—that one from which the black ball has excluded the majority of his particular friends.

This little dinner in Soho, served by the neat parlour-maid, in the sombre oak-panelled parlour, this talk with Lady Jane of the ways and works of girls who made jam, and girls who made tailors' trimmings, was almost as good as a glimpse of a new country. All things here were new to the man who, since he left the University, had lived only amongst people who either were or pretended to be of the mode, modish.

The stories he heard to-night of sin and sorrow, good and bad, brutal crime, heroic effort, tender self-sacrifice, in a world given over to abject poverty, with all the lights and shadows of these lowly lives, touched and interested him more than he could have supposed possible. His heart and his fancy had not been brought so near the lives of the masses since he read, with choking throat and tear-dimmed eyes, Zola's story of the lower deeps in that brilliant Paris of which he, Gerard Hillersdon, knew only the outward glitter and garish colouring. Behind the boulevards and the cafés, the theatres and the music halls, there is always this other world where everybody whose eyes open on the light of God's day is foredoomed a "lifer," sentenced to hard labour, and with but faintest hope of a ticket-of-leave after years of patient work. To Gerard, conscious of wealth in superabundance, these stories of sordid miseries, agonies which a five-pound note might cure, or fatal diseases, incurable for ever, which a little ease and a little comfort might have averted, seemed doubly dreadful—dreadful as a reproach to every rich man in the city of London. And yet to try and alter these things, he told himself, would be like trying to turn the tide of the St. Lawrence, above the falls of Niagara. Were he to cast all his fortune into this great gulf of poverty, there would be one millionaire the less, and for the masses an almost imperceptible gain. But he resolved, sitting in this sombre parlour, with the sunset of a fine May evening glowing on the polished oak panels, as on deep water—he resolved that these stories of hard lives should not have been told him in vain—that he would do some great thing, when once he could decide upon the thing that was most needed—

to lessen the measure of perpetual want. Whether lodging-house or hospital, club or refuge, reformatory or orphanage, something would he create; something which would soothe his own conscience and satisfy his mother's piety.

The dinner was all over before eight o'clock, and the little party left the Vicarage on foot to go to a hall in the neighbourhood which had been lent for a meeting of the choirs formed by the various women's clubs in London. The concert and competition had begun when the Vicar's party entered the lighted hall, and the building was crowded in every part; but seats had been kept for Mr. Cumberland and his friends in a central position in front of the platform.

The choirs were ranged in a semicircle, like the spectators in a Greek theatre. There were eight choirs, numbering in all something over two hundred girls, and each choir wore a sash of a particular colour from shoulder to waist. These bright scarves across the sombre dresses, all following the same line, gave an appearance of uniformity to the whole costume. The eye hardly noted the dingy browns, or rusty blacks, the well-worn olives, or neutral greys of cheap, hard-wearing gowns. The bright faces, the neatly dressed hair—with its varied colouring, from raven black, through all the shades of brown and ruddy gold, to palest flaxen—the blue, and yellow, and green, and rose, and violet sashes filled the hall with life and colour.

Seen thus in a mass of smiling humanity the clubs of London seemed to have sent out a bevy of beauties. The general effect was excellent; and when all the voices burst forth in a great gush of melody, as the united choirs attacked Mendelssohn's "Greeting," Gerard felt the sudden thrill of sympathy which brings unbidden tears to the eyes.

After that burst of harmony, in which all the choirs sang together, there came other part-songs by separate choirs. One of these by the members of a club at Chelsea, which called itself somewhat ambitiously the St. Cecilia, struck Gerard as a marked advance upon the others. They sang Schubert's "Wanderer," arranged as a part-song, with English words, and among the many voices there were tones of purest quality which went to Gerard Hillersdon's heart, and moved him more than the new tenors and much heralded sopranos from Italy, America, and Australia had been able to do of late. Indeed, there had been nights at the opera when he, who was passionately fond of music, had begun to fancy that he had left off caring for it; that one may get beyond music as one gets beyond so many other pleasures; that even to that pure and perfect enjoyment there may come a season of satiety.

To-night those familiar notes thrilled him; those fresh young voices pealing out over the crowded hall awakened in him a rapture of humanity, a longing to be one with this world of humble toilers, this world of struggles and of cares, in which the pleasures were so simple and so few. This was a gala night, no doubt, for all these girls. To stand on yonder platform, to wear those bright-coloured sashes, and mingle their voices in tuneful harmonies, meant a festival. He thought of the girls he met in society, the girls steeped to the lips in worldliness and social intrigue; girls who calculated the cost of every entertainment, appraised its value, social and financial; sneered if the floral decorations at a ball were sparely done; sneered even more contemptuously when Transatlantic or newly-made wealth obtruded itself upon the eye in a too lavish magnificence; girls who were gourmets upon leaving the nursery, and who passed at once from the schoolroom bread and butter to a nice discrimination in quails, ortolans, and perigord pie; girls who went gaily flirting and dancing through the flowery groves of a London June, all freshness and infantine candour under the tempered incandescent lamps, yet having one eye always steadily directed to the main chance of an eligible husband and a handsome establishment.

While he idly philosophised, gazing somewhat dreamily at the wall of faces, rising in a semicircle in front of him, till the topmost rank seemed to touch the roof of the hall, his eye suddenly fastened upon one face in the middle distance, a delicate and pensive face, far paler than the majority of those faces, though pallor is the predominant note in the complexions of London work girls. That one face, having once been perceived by him, shone out from the mass of faces, separate and distinct, and held his gaze. It was the face that had haunted his mind since that strange night in Justin Jermyn's chambers, the face of the girl at the sewing-machine. Line for line it was the face he had seen in a vision, distinct in its identity as the living face he was looking at to-night.

When the singing ceased he questioned Lady Jane, who sat next him.

"There is a girl in the Chelsea choir, a very lovely girl, but with a look of care in her face," he said. "Do you know who she is?"

"I think I know whom you mean. Can you point her out to me?"

He counted the rows and the heads, and indicated the exact position of the girl whose face attracted him.

"Do tell me what you know about her," he said earnestly.

"Very little. She is not in my parish or in my club. I believe she is a good girl. She lives with her father—— "

"Who was once a gentleman and a scholar, but who is now nothing but a drunkard," interrupted Gerard.

"You know her, then?" exclaimed Lady Jane.

"Is that her history?"

"I fear it is. She came once to a social evening at our club, and I talked to her, but she was very reticent, and it is from other girls I have heard the little I know of her story. The father was in the Church, but disgraced himself by intemperate habits. The girl who told me this heard it from him, not from his daughter. Hester is a brave, good girl, and bears the burden of her father's past follies, and works very hard to maintain him in comfort. She is a very clever hand at braiding upon cloth. You may have noticed the braided gowns and jackets that have been worn of late years. Hester Dale does that kind of work for the fashionable tailors."

"Is it hand work or done by the sewing-machine?"

"The greater part is machine work. Hester is very expert—a really exquisite worker by hand or machine—but it is a hard life at best. I wish we could do more to brighten it for her. We could give her many little treats, and pleasant excursions in the country, if she could only forget that she is a gentleman's daughter, and mix with our girls upon an equal footing. She would find a good deal of natural refinement among them, common as their surroundings are. But she does not care to join in anything but the singing classes. Music is her only pleasure."

"Is not London a place of terrible temptations for so lovely a girl, under such adverse circumstances?" asked Gerard, in the pause that followed the next part-song, by an East End choir.

"Oh, Hester is not that kind of girl," answered Lady Jane, quickly; "she is too pure-minded to be approached by any evil influences."

Another choir burst into Mendelssohnic melody, "The Maybells and the Flowers," a choral song that sounded gay and fresh as May itself—and Gerard was again constrained to silence, but he never took his eyes from the pure oval of that pale, pensive face, with its lovely violet eyes, full of a dreamy sweetness, gentle, trustful, innocent as the eyes of a child. Verily, this was a loveliness exempt from the snares and lures that lie in wait for vulgar beauty. A girl with such a face as that would not be easily tempted.

His mind went back to those two occasions upon which he had met Hester Davenport. He remembered that autumn afternoon at the Rectory, when he went into the drawing-room to bid Lilian good-bye, and found a strange young lady sitting with her—a young lady in a plain alpaca gown and a neat straw hat, and with the loveliest face he had seen for many a long day. He remembered the few words interchanged with the curate's daughter—the commonplace inquiries as to how she liked Hanover, and Hanover's ways and manners, and whether she had studied music or painting—and then a hurried adieu, as he ran off to the station. He remembered that other meeting by the sea, and a somewhat longer conversation—a little talk about her favourite walks, and her favourite books. He recalled the sweet face in its youthful freshness—fair as the face of the holy bride in Raffaelle's "Spozalizio"—and then he thought of the girls he had known in the smart world, girls who had made magnificent marriages on the strength of a beauty less exquisite—who were now queens of society, treading lightly upon pathways strewn with the roses of life—worshipped, fêted, royal in their supremacy.

And it was just the starting point, the entourage that made all the difference. This girl might sit at her sewing-machine till her loveliness faded to the pale shadow of the beauty that has been.

He hardly heard the rest of the concert, though the voices were sufficiently loud. He was in a troubled dream of a life, which, after all, concerned him very little. What was Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba? Yet, in his eagerness to find out more about Hester Davenport he bade Lady Jane a hurried good night, and put his sister into her carriage to be driven home alone.

"I am going for a stroll in the moonlight," he said. "Don't sit up for me. I may go to my club for half an hour afterwards."

It was early yet, not quite ten o'clock, and the young May moon was shining over the chimneys of Soho, a tempting night for a walk, and Gerard was given to nocturnal perambulations, so Lilian hardly wondered at being sent home alone.

He watched the brougham till it disappeared round a corner, and then watched the doors of the hall till the audience had all passed out, and had melted away into the infinite space of London; and then he watched the girls who composed the different choirs as they departed, mostly in talkative clusters, full of gaiety after the evening's amusement. Among so many girls, all dressed in much the same fashion, it was not an easy task to single out one—but his eye was keen to distinguish that one girl for whom he waited, as she crossed the street, separating herself from the herd, and walking rapidly westward, he following. She walked with the resolute pace of a woman accustomed to thread her way through the streets of a great city, uncaring for the faces that passed her by, unconscious of observers, intent on her own business, self-contained and self-reliant. Gerard Hillersdon followed on the opposite side of the way, waiting for some quieter spot in which he might address her. They walked in this fashion as far as St. James's Park, and there, under the shelter of spring foliage, beneath Carlton House Terrace, he overtook and accosted her.

"Good evening, Miss Davenport. I hope you have not forgotten me—Gerard Hillersdon, son of the Rector of Helmsleigh?"

He stood bareheaded in the faint evening light—half dusk, half moonlight—holding out his hand to her; but she did not take the extended hand, and she was evidently anxious to pass on without any conversation with him.

"No, I have not forgotten—but I am hurrying home to my father. Good night, Mr. Hillersdon."

He would not let her go.

"Spare me a few minutes—only a few minutes," he pleaded. "I won't delay your return. Let me walk by your side. My sister, your old friend Lilian, is living in London with me. She would like to call upon you if you will let her."

"She was always kind—but it is impossible. My father and I have done with the world in which your sister lives. We are living very humbly, but not unhappily—at least, I have only one anxiety, and that would be worse if we were living in a palace."

"Do you think my sister would value or love you less because you are working to maintain your father? Oh, Miss Davenport, you cannot think so meanly of an old friend!"

"No, no; I am sure she would be as kind as ever—but I would rather not see her. It would recall past miseries. I have tried to blot out all memory of my past life—to exist only in the present. I get on very well"—with a sad little smile—"while I can do that. Please don't make it more difficult for me. Good night."

She stopped, and this time it was she who held out her hand in friendly farewell.

He took the poor little hand, so small, so delicately fashioned, in its shabby cotton glove—a grey cotton glove that had been washed and neatly darned. He took her hand, and held it gently, but with no intention of accepting his dismissal.

"Let me walk home with you," he said. "I have so much to say to you."

"I would rather not. I am used to being alone."

"A part of the way—at least, just a little way. I want to tell you of all the changes that have happened since you left Helmsleigh."

"They cannot concern me. I tell you again I have done with all that life. I have no interest in it."

"Not even in my sister's fate? She was your friend."

"She was, and a very dear friend, but all that is past and gone. I want to know nothing about her, except that she is well and happy."

"She is both—happier than when you knew her. She is in that exalted condition of happiness which seems common to girls who are engaged to be married—curious when one considers their opportunities of appraising the joys of domestic life in the persons of their fathers and mothers."

"She is engaged?" mused Hester, forgetful at once of her resolve not to be interested, and all a woman in her quick sympathies. "Is her *fiancé* any one I knew at Helmsleigh?"

"No; he did not come to Helmsleigh until after you left. He succeeded your father as curate; but he is now in London. He is the Vicar of St. Lawrence's. You may have seen him at Lady Jane's club."

"No; I very seldom go to the club. I give most of my leisure to my father."

"Mr. Davenport is pretty well, I hope?" inquired Gerard, hardly knowing how to avoid giving her pain in any allusion to her father.

"Yes, thank you. He has tolerable health; only—there is no use in hiding it from you—there is always the old trouble to fear. It does not come often, but it is a constant fear."

"He is not cured? He still gives way to the old temptation?"

"Sometimes. He is very good. He struggles against that dreadful inclination; but there are times when it is stronger than himself. He fought a hard battle with himself when we were in Australia—tried to gain his self-respect and the respect of his fellow-men. He succeeded in getting profitable employment as a clerk. We were doing quite well; but the evil hour came. He was tempted by foolish friendly people, who laughed at my anxieties about him—and—the end was madness. He was dismissed from the office where he was a gentleman and a person of importance, with a good salary, and he was glad to drop into a lower form of employment; and he sank and sank to almost the lowest in the city of Melbourne. His friends ceased to care for him. They called him irretrievable. So then I took the care of his life upon my own shoulders. I was able to earn a little money by giving lessons in a depôt for sewing-machines, where I learnt a good many improvements in machine-work—improvements that are not yet common in England—and I saved just enough to pay our passage home—a steerage passage. I brought him home, a sad wreck, hopeless, broken in body and mind, and we found lodgings in Chelsea—very cheap and very humble, but clean and wholesome. A distant relation of my father's pays the rent. We have lived there ever since. I thought at first that I should be able to find pupils for the pianoforte or singing, and that my German education would help me in that way; but I found very soon how hopeless that is, especially when one is living in a poor neighbourhood and wearing a threadbare gown. And then I was lucky enough to discover a mantle-maker in Knightsbridge who wanted what is called a braiding hand, and as my knowledge of the latest sewing-machine enabled me to do this kind of work better than most girls, I soon got regular employment, and I have been able to make my living ever since."

"A poor living and a hard life, I fear," said Gerard.

"Oh, we have enough. We are just comfortable, father and I; and he is so fond of me and so good to me that I ought to be thankful and happy."

"And have you no recreation, no variety in your existence? Is it all hard work?"

"I have the choir practice. That makes a little change now and then, only I don't like to leave my father too often."

"Does he do nothing?"

"He reads the papers at the free library, and in fine weather he does a little gardening."

"But he does nothing to help you—he earns nothing?"

"No, he is past all that. If he could earn money evil would come of it. As it is his pockets are always empty, poor dear, and he cannot pay for the dreadful stuff that would madden his brain. Brandy and chloral cost money, luckily for him and for me."

"Will you let Lilian help you?" asked Gerard. "We are rich now, ridiculously rich. We hold our wealth in trust for all who need it. Let my sister do something to make your life lighter. She shall put a sum of money into the Knightsbridge Bank to your credit, open an account for you, and you can draw the money as you want it. She shall do that to-morrow. Consider the thing done."

"Do not dream of it, Mr. Hillersdon," she answered indignantly. "I would never touch a sixpence of any such money. Do you suppose I would take alms from you or any one else while I am young and strong, and am able to get regular work? I wonder you can think so poorly of me."

"I wonder you can be so cruel as to refuse my friendship—for in refusing my help you deny me the privilege of a friend. It is mere stubbornness to reject a small share in Lilian's good fortune. I tell you again we are absurdly rich."

"If you were twice as rich as the richest of the Rothschilds I would not sacrifice my independence. If I were penniless and my father ill the case might be different. I might ask your sister to help me."

"And must I do nothing to lighten your burden, to soften your hard life?"

"It is not a hard life. It is the life of thousands of girls in this great city—girls who are contented with their lot, and are bright and happy. I am luckier than many of them, for my work is better paid."

"But you were not born to this lot!"

"Perhaps not; but I hardly think that makes it any worse to bear. I have lived the life long enough to be accustomed to it."

They were in Eaton Square by this time, the long and rather dreary square, with its tall, barn-like church, which even Fashion cannot make beautiful. When they were about half-way between the church and the western end of the square Hester stopped abruptly.

"I must beg you to come no further," she said, and there was a resolute look in the pale proud face under the light of the street lamp that commanded obedience.

"Good night, then," he said moodily. "You will at least tell me where you live?"

"No, there would be nothing gained. My father and I wish to be forgotten."

She hurried away from him, and he stood there in moonlight and gaslight, in the dull level square, thinking how strange life is.

Should he follow her and find out where she lived? No; that would be a base and vulgar act, and he might obtain her address without that sacrifice of self-respect and risk of her contempt. He could find out at the club, of whose choir she was a member. She fancied herself safely hidden under her assumed name, no doubt; but he had heard that alias from Lady Jane, and it would be easy enough to discover the dwelling-place of Hester Dale.

He walked home melancholy, and yet elated. He was so glad to have found her. It seemed as if a new life were beginning for him that night.

He did not go to any of the haunts which invite the footsteps of youth betwixt midnight and morning. Dancing tempted him not, neither music nor cards. He was out of tune with all such common amusements, and the commonplace emotions which they produce. He felt as Endymion felt after the mystery of the cavern; felt as if in that walk in the dim evening shadows and in the bright moonlight he had been in another world, and now was back in the old world again, and found it passing dull.

All was silent in his house when he went in, but through an open window in the lofty hall a chilling wind crept in and stirred the palm leaves, and awakened weird harmonies in an Æolian harp that hung near the casement. His favourite reading-lamp was burning on the table in his study, that room which owed its existence to Justin Jermyn's taste rather than his own, and was yet in all things as his own taste would have chosen.

The valet who was waiting up for him received his orders and retired, and as his footsteps slowly died away in the corridor, Gerard Hillersdon felt the oppression of an intolerable solitude.

There were letters on a side table. Of all the numerous deliveries in the district none ever failed to bring a heap of letters for the millionaire—invitations, letters of introduction, begging letters, circulars, prospectuses of every imaginable mode and manner of scheme engendered in the wild dreams of the speculator. He only glanced at these things, and then flung them into a basket which his secretary cleared every morning. His secretary replied to the invitations; he had neatly engraved cards expressive of every phase of circumstances—the pleasure in accepting—the honour of dining—the regret in declining—and all the rest. The chief thing which money had done for Gerard Hillersdon was to lessen the labour of life—to shunt all his burdens upon other shoulders.

This is what wealth can do. If it cannot always buy happiness, it can generally buy ease. It seems a hard thing to the millionaire that he must endure his own gout, and that he cannot hire some one to get up early in the morning for him.

Among all the letters which had accumulated since six o'clock, there was only one that interested him, a long letter from Edith Champion, who had the feminine passion for writing lengthily to the man she loved, albeit of late he had rarely replied in any more impassioned form than a telegram.

"It is so much nicer to talk," he told her when she reproached him, "and there is nothing to prevent our meeting."

"But there is. There are whole days on which we don't meet—my Finchley days."

"True. But then we are so fresh to each other the day after. Why discount our emotions by writing about them? I love to get your letters, all the same," he added kindly. "Your pen is so eloquent."

"I can say more with my pen than I ever dare to say with my lips," she answered.

Her letter to-night was graver than usual.

"I have been at Finchley all day—such a trying day. I think the end is coming—at least, the doctors have told me they do not give him much longer. I cannot say I fear he is dying, since you know that his death will mean the beginning of a new existence for me, with all the hope and gladness of my girlhood; and yet my mind is full of fear when I think of him and of you, and of what my life has been for the last three years. I do not think I have failed in any duty to him. I know that I have never thwarted him, that I have studied his wishes in the arrangement of our lives, have never complained of the dull people he brought about me, or refused to send a card to any of his city friends. If he had objected to your visits I should have given up your acquaintance. I have never disobeyed him. But he liked to see you in his house; he never felt the faintest pang of jealousy, though he must have known that you were more to me than any common friend. I have done my duty, Gerard; and yet I feel myself disgraced somehow by those three years of my married life. I was sold like a slave in the market-place, and though such bargains are the fashion nowadays, and everybody approves of the market and the barter, yet a woman who has consented to be bought by the highest bidder cannot feel very proud of herself in after life. It is nearly over, Gerard, and by-and-by you must teach me to forget. You must give me back my girlhood. You can, and you only. There is no one else who can—no one—no one."

He sat brooding, with that letter open before him. Yes, he was bound as fast as ever man was bound—bound by every obligation that could constrain an honest man. Conscience, feeling, honour alike constrained him. This was the woman to whom he gave his heart four years ago, in the fresh morning of a young man's life—in that one bright year of youth when all pleasures, hopes, and fancies are new and vivid, and when the feet that tread this workaday earth move as lightly as if they wore Mercury's pinions. What a happy year it had been! What a bright, laughing love! Though he might look back now and sneer at his first love as commonplace and conventional, he could but remember how sunny the world had been, how light his heart, how keen his enjoyment of life in those thoughtless days—before he had learnt to think! Yes; that had been the charm of existence—he had lived in the present. He must try to live in the present now—to look neither backward nor forward—to enjoy, as the butterflies enjoy—without memory, without forecast.

He had not forgotten the opening chapter of the "Peau de Chagrin"—the dismal centenarian in the bric-à-brac shop, the man with a face like a death's head, the dreary stoic who had existed for a hundred years, and yet had never lived. He had the novel on the table before him—an *edition de luxe*, richly illustrated, with duplicate engravings on India paper. The story had a curious fascination for him, and he could not rid himself of the idea that the consumptive Valentin was his own prototype. In a curious, fanciful indulgence of this grim notion, he had nailed a large sheet of drawing-paper on the panelled wall that faced his writing-table. He had no enchanted skin to hang on the white paper, to indicate by its gradual contraction the wasting of his own life—the hurrying feet of Death; but he had invented for himself a gauge of his strength and nervine vitality. Upon the elephantine sheet he had drawn with a bold and rapid pen the irregular outline of an imaginary chagrin skin, and from time to time he had drawn other lines within this outline, always following the original form. In the steadiness and force of the line his pen made he saw an indication of the steadiness of his nerves, the soundness of his physical health. Of the five lines upon the white paper the innermost showed weakest and most uncertain. There had been a gradual deterioration from the first line to the fifth.

To-night, after a long interval of melancholy thought, he rose suddenly, dipped a broad-nibbed pen into a capacious ink-pot, and with slow, uncertain hand traced the sixth line—traced it with a hand so tremulous that this last line differed more markedly from the line immediately before it than that fifth line differed from the first bold outline. Yet between the first and the fifth lines there had been an interval of nearly six months, while between the fifth and the sixth the interval was but three days.

The element of passion, with its fever of hope and expectancy, had newly entered into his life.

CHAPTER XIII.

"OUT WENT MY HEART'S NEW FIRE, AND LEFT IT COLD."

GERARD HILLERSDON and Mrs. Champion met but rarely during the month of May. Doomed men are apt to linger beyond the anticipations of their medical attendants, and the famous physician from Cavendish Square continued his bi-weekly visits through all the bright long sunny days which society's calendar has devoted to the pursuit of pleasure—a chase from which Mrs. Champion's handsome face and form were missing. Other figures there were as perfect, other faces as famous for beauty; and it was only once in a way that one of the butterflies noted the absence of that Queen butterfly; it was only once in a way that friendship murmured with a sigh, "Poor Mrs. Champion, mewed up with an invalid husband all through this lovely season!"

Edith Champion gave the fading life her uttermost devotion. She had a keen sense of honour, after all—this wife who had gone on loving her first lover all through her married life. She had a more sensitive conscience than her world would have readily believed. She wanted to do her duty to the dying husband, so that she might surrender herself heart and mind to a new life of gladness when he should be at peace, and yet feel no sting of remorse, and yet have no dark memory to fling its shadow across her sunlight.

With this laudable desire, she spent the greater part of her life at Finchley, where she had taken a villa near the doctor's house, so as to be within call by day or night. She withdrew herself from all friends and acquaintances except Gerard Hillersdon, and even him she saw only two or three times a week, driving into London and taking tea in the cool Hertford Street drawing-room, with her nerves always strained by the dread of some urgent telegram that should call her back to her duties.

"The end may come at any moment," she said. "It would be dreadful if I were absent at the last."

"Do you think it would really matter—to him?" asked Gerard.

"I think it would. He rarely addresses me by name, but I think he always knows me. He will take things from my hand—food or medicine—which he will not take from his nurses. They tell me he is much more restless when I am not there. I can do very little for him; but if I can make him just a shade easier and calmer by sitting at his bedside it is my duty to be there. I feel that it is wrong even to be away for a couple of hours this afternoon—but if I did not leave him and that dreary house once in a way I think my brain would go as his has gone."

"Is the house so very dreadful?"

"Dreadful, no. It is a charming house, nicely furnished, the very pink of neatness, in the midst of a delightful old garden. It is what one knows about it—the troubled minds that have worn themselves out in those prim, orderly rooms, the sleepless eyes that have stared at those bright, pretty wall-papers, the wild delusions, the attempted suicides, the lingering deaths! When I think of all those things, the silence of the house seems intolerable, the ticking of the clock a slow torture. But you will teach me to forget all this misery by-and-by, Gerard? You will teach me to forget, won't you?"

That was the only allusion she had ever made of late to the near future. It was forgetfulness she yearned for, as the chief boon the future could bestow.

"You cannot think how long this summer has seemed to me," she said. "I hope I am not impatient, that I would not hasten the end by a single day—but the days and the hours are terribly long."

An hour was the utmost respite that Mrs. Champion allowed herself in that cool perfumed room, *tête-à-tête* with her first lover, surrounded with all the old frivolities, the tea-table, set out with tiny *foie-gras* sandwiches, and hot-house fruit, the automatic Japanese fan, mounted on a bamboo stand, set in motion with the lightest touch, the new books and magazines scattered about, to be carried off in her victoria presently, for the solace of wakeful nights. Only an hour of converse with the man she loved, broken into very often by some officious caller, who saw her carriage at the door, and insisted upon being let in.

It seemed to her now and then that Gerard was somewhat absent and restrained during these interviews, but she attributed his languid manner to the depressing nature of all she had to tell him. Her own low spirits communicated themselves to him.

"We are so thoroughly in sympathy," she told herself.

He left her one afternoon late in June, and instead of going into the Park where the triple rank of carriages by the Achilles statue offered to the admiring lounger a bouquet of high-bred beauty, set off by the latest triumphs of court dressmakers, he walked past the Alexandra Hotel and dropped into Sloane Street, and thence to Chelsea. His feet had taken him in that direction very often of late.

He had found no difficulty in discovering Hester's dwelling-place, for on his way to the St. Cecilia Club he had stumbled against old Davenport, bottle-nosed, shabby, but wearing clean linen, carefully brushed clothes, and with a certain survival of his old Oxford manner.

Neither drunken habits nor dark vicissitudes had impaired the old man's memory. He recognised Hillersdon at a glance, and cordially returned his greeting.

"Wonderful changes have come about since we saw each other in Devonshire, Mr. Hillersdon," he said. "I have gone very low down the ladder of Fortune, and you have gone very high up. I congratulate you upon your good luck—not undeserved, certainly not. You acted like a hero, my dear young friend, and such an act merited a handsome reward. I read the story in the newspapers."

"A much exaggerated version of the truth, no doubt. I'll walk your way, if you please, Mr. Davenport. I should like to know how the world has used you."

"No better than it uses a homeless mongrel, sir; but perhaps no worse than I deserved. You remember what Hamlet says: 'Use every man after his desert, and who shall 'scape whipping?' I don't like to take you out of your way, Mr. Hillersdon."

"My way is no way. I was only strolling—with no settled purpose."

They were on the Chelsea embankment, where the old houses of

Cheyne Walk still recall the old-world restfulness of a day that is dead, while the Suspension Bridge and Battersea Park tell of an age that means change and progress.

"You like old Chelsea and its associations," said Davenport.

"Very much. I remember the place when I was a boy, and I recognise improvement everywhere; but I grieve over the lost landmarks, Don Saltero, the old narrow Cheyne Walk, the sober shabbiness——"

"There are older things that I remember—in the days when my people lived in Lowndes Square, and I used to come fresh from Balliol to take my fill of pleasure in the London season. My father was a prosperous Q.C., a man employed in all the great cases where intellect and oratory were wanted. He was earning a fine income—though not half as much as your famous silk-gowns earn nowadays—and he spent as fast as he earned. He had a large family and was very liberal to his children—and when he died, in the prime of life, he left his widow and orphans the fag-end of a lease, a suite of Louis Quatorze furniture, already out of fashion, a choice collection of Wedgwood, and a few Prouts, Tophams, Hunts, and Duncans. He had put away nothing out of the big fees that had been pouring in for the last fifteen years of his life. He used to talk about beginning to save next year, but that next year never came. The sale of the lease and furniture made a little fund for my mother and three unmarried daughters. For me and my brothers the world was our oyster—to be opened as best we might."

"You had scholarship to help you."

"Yes, Greek and Latin were my only stock in trade. A friend of my father's gave me a small living within a couple of years of my taking priest's orders, and on the strength of that I married, and took private pupils. I lost my wife when Hetty was only twelve years old, but things had begun to go wrong before then. My second living was in a low district, village and vicarage on clay soil, too many trees, and no drainage. The devil's tooth of neuralgia fastened itself upon me, body and bones, and my life for some years was a perpetual fight with pain. Like Paul I fought with beasts—invisible beasts—that gnawed into my soul. Here is my poor little domicile. I hardly knew we had walked so far."

He had taken his homeward way automatically, while Gerard walked beside him, through shabby streets of those small semi-detached houses which the builder has devised for needy gentility and prosperous labour—here the healthy mechanic with five and thirty shillings a week, corduroy trousers and shirt sleeves, there the sickly clerk, with a weekly guinea and a threadbare alpaca coat. Here shining windows and gaily filled flower-boxes, there dirt and slatternliness, broken bottles and weeds in the tiny forecourt, misery and squalor in its most hideous aspect. Gerard had marked the shabbiness of the neighbourhood, and he felt that somewhere in the midst of this sordid labyrinth he should find his Ariadne, though her hand would never have furnished him with the clue.

The house before which Mr. Davenport stopped was no better than the other houses which they had passed, but the best had been made of its shabbiness, the forecourt was full of stocks and carnations, and a row of Mary lilies marked the boundary rail which divided this tiny enclosure from the adjacent patch. The window-panes shone bright and clear, and the window-box was a hanging garden of ivy-leafed geranium, yellow marguerites, and mignonette.

"What a pretty little garden!" exclaimed Gerard.

"Yes, there are a good many flowers for such a scrap of ground. Hettie and I are very fond of our garden—we've a goodish bit of ground at the back. It's about the only thing we can take any pride in with such surroundings as ours."

And then, lingering at the gate, as Gerard lingered, the old man asked—

"Will you come in and rest after your walk? I can give you a lemon squash."

"That's a tempting offer upon one of the hottest afternoons we have had this year. Yes, I shall be pleased to sit down for half an hour, if you are sure I shan't be in your way."

"I shall be very glad of your company. I get plenty of solitude when Hettie is out on her long tramps to Knightsbridge. She often passes the house in which her grandfather used to entertain some of the best people in London—a work-girl, with a bundle under her arm. Hard lines, ain't it?"

He opened the door and admitted his visitor into a passage fourteen feet by two feet six, out of which opened the front parlour and general living room, a small room, with a little stunted cupboard on each side of the fireplace. Gerard looked about him with greedy eyes, noting every detail.

The furniture was of the commonest, a pembroke table, half a dozen cane-seated chairs, a sofa such as can only be found in lodging-house parlours; but there were a few things which gave individuality to the room, and in somewise redeemed its shabbiness.

Fronting the window stood a capacious arm-chair, covered with apple-blossom chintz; the ugly sofa was draped with soft Japanese muslin; a cheap paper screen of cool colouring broke the ugly outline of the folding doors, and a few little bits of old china and a row of books gave meaning to the wooden slabs at the top of the dwarf cupboards.

There was a bowl of flowers on the table, vivid yellow corn-cockles, which brightened the room like a patch of sunlight.

"Try that easy chair," said Davenport, "it's uncommonly comfortable."

"Thanks, no," seating himself near the window, "this will do very nicely. That's your own particular chair, I know."

"You are right," sighed the old man, sinking into its cushioned depths. "This chair was Hettie's present on my last birthday. It was a shabby old chair when I first saw it at a broker's in the King's Road—but I was caught by the comfortable shape—and I told my poor girl I'd seen a second-hand chair that looked the picture of comfort. She didn't seem to take much notice of what I said, and the next time I passed the dealer's yard—where the chair used to stand in the open air amongst a lot of other things—it was gone. I told Hettie it had disappeared. 'Sold, I suppose,' said she, 'what a pity!' And nearly a year afterwards, on my birthday, the chair was brought in, freshly covered, as you see it. My poor girl had been paying for it by instalments, a shilling or two at a time, ever since I mentioned it to her. How proud and happy we both were that day, in spite of our poverty! I remember when I was at the University my brothers and sisters and I clubbed together to buy a silver tea-kettle for my mother on her silver-wedding day—and it only resulted in general mortification. She was sorry we had spent our money—and she didn't like the shape of the kettle. It was half covered with a long inscription, so we couldn't change it, and I know two of my sisters were in tears about it before the day was over. But I must make you that lemon squash. *Nunc est bibendum!* Perhaps though, you'd prefer a John Collins?"—with a curiously interrogative look. "There isn't any gin in the house, but I could send for a bottle."

"I much prefer the unsophisticated lemon; though I envy a city waiter the facility with which he made his name a part of the convivial vocabulary. Falstaff could not have done more."

Mr. Davenport opened one of the dwarf cupboards, and produced tumblers, lemons, and pounded sugar. Then he went out of the room, and reappeared in a few minutes with a jug of fresh water. His narrow means did not permit the luxury of a syphon. He concocted the two glasses of lemonade carefully and deliberately, Gerard Hillersdon watching him all the time in a melancholy reverie; but the image that filled his mind was that of the absent daughter, not the form of the father bodily present to his eye.

He was thinking of yonder easy-chair, paid for in solitary shillings, the narrow surplus left from the necessities of daily life. He thought of that refined and delicate face, that fragile form, far too finely made for life's common uses—thought of her daily deprivations, her toilsome walks, her weary monotony of task-work.

Yes, there was the modern wheel upon which feminine poverty is racked—the sewing-machine. It stood in front of the window by which he was sitting. She had covered it with a piece of art muslin, giving an air of prettiness even to the instrument of her toil. A pair of delf candlesticks stood on a little table near the machine, with the candles burnt low in the sockets. She had been working late last night, perhaps. It maddened him to think that out of all his wealth he could do nothing to help her—she would take nothing out of his superabundance. If he were to heed the appeals of all the strangers who wrote to him—pouring out their domestic secrets, their needs and troubles, in eight-page letters, he might give away every penny of his income—but this one woman, whom he yearned to help, would take nothing. This was Fate's sharpest irony. Full of these thoughts, he sipped his lemonade and discussed the political situation with Mr. Davenport, whose chief occupation was to read the papers at the Free Library, and who was an ardent politician. He lingered in the hope of seeing Hester before he left.

It was nearly four o'clock, and the June afternoon had a drowsy warmth which was fast beguiling old Nicholas Davenport into slumber. His words were coming very slowly, and he gradually sank into a blissful silence, and was off upon that rapid dream-journey which takes the sleeper into a new world in an instant—plunges him into the midst of a *dramatis personæ* that moment invented whom he seems to have known all his life.

A bee was humming amongst the sweet-scented stocks, and a town butterfly was fluttering about the mignonette. A hawker's cry in the next street came with a musical sound, as if the hawker had been some monotonous bird with a song of only three notes. Still Gerard lingered, hoping that the old man would wake presently and resume the conversation. He was in despair at the idea of leaving without seeing Hester.

He wanted to see that delicately-modelled face—the face in the Sposalizio—in the daylight. He wanted to be her friend, if she would let him. What harm could there be in such a friendship? They were too completely severed by the iron wall of circumstances ever to become lovers. But friends they might be—friends for mutual help and comfort. He could share with her the good things of this life. She could spiritualise his lower nature by the influence of that child-like purity which set her apart from the common world.

He heard a light footstep, and then the click of a latch. She was at the gate, she was coming in, a slim and graceful figure in a light cambric gown and a sailor hat, such a neat little white straw hat, which cast pearly shadows on the exquisite cheek and chin, and darkened the violet eyes.

She started and blushed crimson on seeing him, and darted a despairingly reproachful look at her father, who had risen confusedly in the midst of a dream. Gerard, too, had risen as she entered, and stood facing her.

"Don't be angry with your father or with me, Miss Davenport. We happened to meet each other an hour ago on the Embankment, and I walked home with him. And now that I am admitted to your home you will let me bring my sister, I hope. She will be glad to renew her old friendship with you. Do not hold her at arm's length, even if you shut your door against me. You know how sympathetic she is."

Hester did not answer him for a minute or so. She sank into a chair, and took off the neat little hat, and passed her hand across her brow, smoothing the soft pale brown hair which shadowed her forehead. She looked tired and harassed, almost too weary for speech, and at last, when speech came, there was a languor in her tone, an accent as of one who submits to fate.

"Yes, I remember," she said, "your sister was always good and sweet. She was very kind to me; some of my happiest hours were spent with her. But that is all past and done with. It is hardly kind of you to ask me to remember——"

"I don't want you to remember the old life. I only want you to open your heart to an old friend, who will help to make your present life happier. Lilian may come, may she not? I can see you mean yes."

"How can I say no, when you are so eager to do me a kindness?" and then she glanced at the old man piteously. "If father does not mind a face that will recall his residence at Helmsleigh, and all he suffered there."

"No, no, Hettie, I don't mind. I have suffered too much, and in too many places, since the Pain-devil stuck his claws into me. If the people who blame me—who talk of me as a drunken old dotard—could suffer an hour of the agony I have suffered off and on for months at a stretch, they would be a little more charitable in their judgments. I am not blaming your father, Mr. Hillersdon; he was very good to me. He bore with me as long as he could, till at last I disgraced myself. It was a terrible scandal; no man could bear up against it. I felt after that night all was over."

"Don't, father, don't speak of it."

"I must, Hettie. I want to tell Mr. Hillersdon all that you have been to me—what a heroine, what a martyr!"

"Nonsense, father! I have only done what other daughters are doing all the world over. And, thank God, you are better now! You have had very little of the old pain for the last two years. You are stronger and better, living as you do now, than when—when you were less careful. Your neuralgia will never come back, I hope."

"If Miss Hillersdon doesn't mind visiting us in this shabby lodging, we shall be very pleased to see her," said Davenport, brushing away a remorseful tear. "It cuts me to the heart that my poor girl has not a friend in the world except that best of women, Lady Jane Blenheim."

His request being granted, Gerard had no excuse for delaying his departure. He offered his hand to Hester as he said good-bye, and when her slender fingers touched his own, his cheek and brow flushed as if a wave of fire had passed over his face, and his eyes grew dim; only for a moment, but that fiery wave had never clouded his vision at the touch of any other woman—not even Edith Champion, to whom he had given the devotion of years. His heart was beating violently as he walked along the shabby street, past gardens that were full of summer flowers, and forecourts that were no better than rubbish heaps, past squalid indigence and industrious poverty. It was not till he pulled up under the shadow of the trees in Cheyne Walk that the sense of a great joy or a great trouble began to abate, and he was able to think calmly.

He seated himself on a bench near the river, and waited till his pulses beat a more tranquil measure.

"I am a fool," he muttered. "Why should her beauty agitate me like this? I have seen beautiful women before to-day—women in the zenith of their charms, not pallid and worn like this heroic girl. The woman who is to be my wife is handsomer, and in a grander style of beauty. And yet, because I must not care for this one, every nerve is strained, every pulse is racing. I am a fool, and the worst of fools, remembering what old Dr. South told me. Is this sparing myself? is this husbanding my resources? To be so moved by such a trivial cause—not to be able to admire a beautiful face without being shaken as if by an earthquake."

He remembered the book upon his writing-table, the "Peau de Chagrin," that story which had an irresistible fascination for him, every page of which he had hung over many a night in his hours of lonely thought. How vain had been Valentin's endeavour to lead that passionless life in which the oil in the lamp burns slowly! But he hoped to prove himself wiser than Balzac's ill-fated hero. He, too, had planned an existence free from all strong emotions. In his life of millionaire and man of fashion there were to be no agitations. He looked forward to a future union with Edith as a haven of rest. Married to a woman whom he had loved long enough to take love for granted, a woman whose fidelity had been tested by time, whose constancy he need never doubt, for him the years would glide onward with easy pace to sober middle life, and even to the grey dignity of honoured age. But he, like Valentin, had been warned against the drama and passion of life. He was to be, not to act or to suffer.

And for a mere transient fancy, the charm of a pensive countenance, the romance of patient poverty, he had let his veins run liquid fire, his heart beat furiously. He was ashamed of his own inconsistency; and presently, seeing a hansom sauntering along under the trees with a horse that looked a good mover, he hailed the man, and asked if his horse were fresh enough to drive as far as Finchley. Naturally the reply was yes, and in the next minute he was being carried swiftly through the summer dust with his face to the north.

He had often meditated this drive to the northern suburb with his own horses, and then it had seemed to him that to approach the house in which Mr. Champion was lengthening out the lees of life would be an error in taste, although he and the dying man had been upon the friendliest terms ever since Edith's marriage. This afternoon he felt a curious eagerness to be with the woman to whom he had bound himself, a feverish anxiety which subjugated all scruples.

He drove to the house Mrs. Champion had hired for herself—a small villa, in a well-kept garden. It was past eight when he rang the bell, and the lawn and flower-beds were golden in the sunset. He expected to find Edith Champion at dinner, and had made up his mind to dine with her, *tête-à-tête* perhaps, for the first time in their lives.

Dinner was out of the question, for the present, at any rate. One of the match footmen, whose faces he knew in Hertford Street, came strolling in a leisurely way across the lawn, pipe in mouth, to answer the bell, suddenly pocketed his pipe and changed his bearing on recognising Mr. Hillersdon, and informed him that Mrs. Champion was at Kendal House, and that Mr. Champion was very bad.

"Worse than usual, do you suppose?" asked Gerard.

"I'm afraid so, sir. Mrs. Champion came home at half-past seven, but a messenger came for her while she was dressing for dinner, and she just put on her cloak, and ran across the road without even a hat. I'm afraid it's the hend."

"Which is Kendal House?"

"I'll show you, sir."

The footman stalked out into the road with that slow and solemn stalk which is taught to footmen, and which is perhaps an element in the trade-unionism of domestic service—a studied slowness of movement in all things, lest perchance one footman should at any time do the work of two. Mrs. Champion's footman was a person of highest quality, and was even now oppressed with a sense of resentment at having to perform his duties single-handed at Finchley, while his comrade was leading a life of luxurious idleness in Hertford Street.

He pointed out a carriage entrance in a wall a little further up the road, and on the opposite side of the way, and to this gate Gerard hurried, and entered a highly respectable enclosure, a circular lawn girt with gravel drive, shrubberies hiding the walls, and in front of him a stately square stone house with classic portico, and two wings, suggesting drawing-room and billiard-room.

The first glance at those numerous windows gave him a shock. All the blinds were down. It was over, he thought. Edith Champion was a widow.

Yes, it was over. The sober, elderly manservant who opened the door informed him that Mr. Champion had breathed his last at five minutes to eight. Mrs. Champion was just in time to be present at his last moments. The end had been peaceful and painless.

Edith Champion came downstairs, accompanied by the doctor, while the servant was talking, her eyes streaming. She saw Gerard, and went across the hall to him.

"It is all over," she said agitatedly. "He knew me at the last —knew me and spoke my name, just as I thought he would. Thank God, I was there; I was not too late for that last word. I did not think I could feel it so much, after those long days and weeks of anticipation."

"Let me take you to your own house," Gerard said gently.

She was in a black lace dinner-dress, with a light summer cloak flung loosely about her, her white throat rising out of the gauzy blackness like a Parian pillar, her dark eyes drowned in tears, and tears still wet on her pale cheeks. All that was tender and womanly in her nature had been shaken by that final parting. If she had sold herself to the rich man as slaves are sold in an Eastern market he had been a most indulgent master, and her slavery had been of the lightest.

The doctor attended her to the threshold, and she went out leaning on Gerard's arm. Even in the midst of her natural regret there was sweetness in the thought that henceforth she belonged to him. It was his privilege and his duty to protect her, to think for her in all things.

"You will telegraph to my husband's solicitor," she said to the doctor falteringly, as she dried her tears. "He will be the proper person to arrange everything with you, I suppose. I shall not leave the Laurels till after—— "

"I understand," interrupted the doctor, saving her the pain of that final word. "All shall be arranged without troubling you more than is absolutely necessary."

"Good night," she said, offering her hand. "I shall not forget how kind and thoughtful you always were. He could not have been better cared for."

Gerard led her out of the formal enclosure where the conifers and evergreens were darkening under the shadows of night. The gate was open at the Laurels, and the stately footman was on the watch for his mistress's return, his powdered head bared to the evening breeze. Within there were lights and the brightness of flowers, dinner ready to be served.

"You will take something, I hope?" said Gerard, when the butler announced dinner.

They had gone into the drawing-room, and she was sitting with her face hidden in her hands.

"No, no, I could not eat anything," and then to the butler, "Mr. Hillersdon will dine. You can serve dinner for him, and tell George to bring me some tea here."

"Then let me have a cup of tea with you," said Gerard. "I am no more in the mood for dining than you are."

This gratified her, even in the midst of her sorrows. Women have an exaggerated idea of the value which men set upon dinner, and no sacrifice propitiates them more surely than the surrender of that meal.

Edith Champion did not argue the point. She only gave a little sigh, and dried her tears, and became more composed.

"I think I did my duty to him," she said presently.

"Most thoroughly. You made him happy, which is more than many a wife can say about a husband she has adored," answered Gerard.

The footman brought in the tea-table, and lighted the candles on the mantelpiece and piano, and drew the curtains, with an air of wishing to dispel any funereal gloom which the shadow of that dark event at Kendal House had spread over the room. He and the other servants had been talking about the funeral and their mourning already, speculating as to whether Mr. Champion had left legacies to such of his servants as had been with him "say a year," concluded George, footman, who had been in the service fourteen months.

Mrs. Champion made a little motion of her hand towards the teapot, and George poured out the tea. She felt that the etiquette of grief would not allow her to perform that accustomed office. She sat still, and allowed herself to be waited upon, and sipped and sighed, while Gerard also sipped in pensive silence.

He was thinking that this was the second time within a very few hours that he was taking tea with Edith Champion, and yet what a gap those few hours had cloven across his life. The woman he had loved so long, and to whom he had irrevocably pledged himself, was free from her bondage. There could be no longer doubt or hesitancy in their relations. A certain interval must be conceded to the prejudices of society; and then, at the end of that conventional widowhood this woman, whom he had loved so long, would lay aside her weeds, and put on her wedding-gown, ready to stand beside him at the altar. For months he had known that Mr. Champion's end was imminent; and yet to-night it seemed to him as if he had never expected the man to die.

The silence was growing oppressive before either the lady or her guest found speech. The footman had retired, leaving the tea-table in front of his mistress, and they were alone again.

"You will not remain in this house after the funeral, of course," said Gerard, having cast about for something to say.

"No, I shall leave England immediately. I have been thinking of my plans while you and I have been sitting here. I hate myself for my egotism; but I could not go on thinking of—him. It would do no good. I shall not easily forget him, poor fellow. His face and his voice will be in my thoughts for a long time to come—but I could not help thinking of myself too. It seems so strange to be free—to be able to go just where I like—not to be obliged to follow a routine. I shall go to Switzerland as soon as I can get ready. I shall take Rosa Gresham with me. She is always enchanted to turn her back upon that adorable parish of hers."

"But why should you go away?"

"It will be best. If I were to stay in England you and I would be meeting, and now—now that he is gone people would rake up the past, and say ill-natured things about us. It will be far better that we should see very little of each other till the year of my widowhood is over. A long time, Gerard; almost long enough for you to forget me."

Her tone implied that such forgetfulness must needs be impossible.

"What if I refuse to submit to such a separation, even to propitiate Mrs. Grundy? We have treated that worthy personage in a very off-hand manner hitherto. Why should we begin to care about her?"

"Because everything is different now he is gone. While my husband approved of my life nobody could presume to take objection to anything I might do; but I stand alone now and must take care of my good name—your future wife's good name, Gerard!"

"How sweetly you put the question! But, my dear Edith, must we really be parted so long? Could people talk about us if you and I were living in the same town, seeing each other every day?"

"You don't know how ill-natured people can be. Indeed, Gerard, it will be better for both our sakes."

"Not for my sake," he said earnestly.

He had gone to Finchley that evening upon a sudden impulse, as if he had been flying from an unimagined peril. He had felt, vaguely, as if his first love were slipping away from him, as if an effort were needed to strengthen the old bonds; and now the woman who should have helped him to be true was about to forsake him—to sacrifice inclination and happiness to the babbling crowd.

"What can it matter how people talk of us?" he cried impetuously. "We have to think of ourselves and our own happiness. Remember how short life is, and what need we have to husband our brief span of years. Why waste a year, or half a year, upon conventionalities? Let me go with you wherever you go. Let us be married next week."

"No, no, no, Gerard. God knows, I love you, only too dearly; but I will not be guilty of deliberate disrespect to him who has gone. He was always good to me—kind and indulgent to a fault. I should have been a better wife, perhaps, if he had been a tyrant. I will not insult him in his grave. A year hence; a year from this day I shall belong to you!"

"And Mrs. Grundy will have no fault to find with you. 'Content to dwell in decencies for ever,'" quoted Gerard, with a touch of scorn. "Well, you must have your own way. I have pleaded, and you have answered. Good night. I suppose I shall be allowed to bid you good-bye at the railway station before you leave England."

"Of course. Rosa shall write to you about our plans directly they are settled. You will be at the funeral, Gerard, will you not?"

"Naturally. Once more good night."

They clasped hands, she tearful still, ready to break down again at any moment; and so he left her.

The hansom had waited for him, the horse's head in a nosebag, the driver asleep on his perch.

"Only a year, and you are mine as I am yours," mused Gerard, as he was driven westward. "But a year sometimes makes a wide gap in a life. What will it do in mine?"

CHAPTER XIV.

"FOR SOME MUST STAND, AND SOME MUST FALL OR FLEE."

Mr. Champion had been laid at rest in a brand new vault at Kensal Green for nearly a month, and his widow was at Interlachen, with her cousin, maid, and courier, excursioning mildly among the snow-peaks and glaciers, listening idly to Mrs. Gresham's interpretation of Mendelssohn, Chopin, and all the new Sclavonic composers, reading Shelley, Keats, and Swinburne, and abandoning herself to a vague melancholy, which found relief in the solitude of everlasting hills, and the seclusion of private sitting-rooms at the hotel. From Interlachen Gerard Hillersdon received his sweetheart's lengthy and frequent letters, written in a fine, firm hand, on the smoothest paper, with a delicate perfume of wood violets—letters descriptive of every drive and every ramble among the hills, letters meditative upon the poetry she had been reading, or the last German novel, with its diffuse sentimentality and its domestic virtues—letters which generally enclosed a little white woolly flower, plucked amidst perpetual snows; letters which did all that letters can do to bridge the distance between lovers. Gerard replied less lengthily, but with unfailing tenderness, to all those letters of June and July. He wrote from his heart, or he told himself that he was so writing. He wrote with a large panel portrait of his sweetheart upon his desk, in front of him, a portrait which met his eyes whenever he lifted them from his paper, a lifelike likeness of the beautiful face and figure, gorgeous in Court gown and mantle, a tiara on the imperial head, a riviere of diamonds upon the perfect neck; a costume whose splendour would have been enough for a princess of the blood royal, yet which seemed only in harmony with Edith Champion's beauty.

Sometimes between that face, with its grand lines, and classic regularity, there would come the vision of another face, altogether different, yet no less beautiful—the ethereal loveliness of the Raffaelle Madonna, the elongated oval cheek and chin and straight sharply-chiselled nose, the exquisite refinement of the pensive lips and delicate arch of the eyebrows over violet eyes, the pearly tints of a complexion in which there was no brilliancy of colour, no peach bloom, only a transparent fairness beneath which the veins about the temples and around the eyes showed faintly azure—an oval face framed in shadowy brown hair. With what a fatal persistence this image haunted him; and yet he had seen Hester Davenport only once since that afternoon at Chelsea, when the old man admitted him to the humble lodging-house parlour. Once only had he returned there, and that was to escort his sister, who was delighted to renew her acquaintance with the curate's beautiful daughter. That had happened three weeks ago, and Lilian and Hester had met several times since then—meetings of which Gerard had heard every detail.

And now the London season was drawing to its close and Lilian had to leave her brother's house in order to do her duty as an only daughter, and accompany her father and mother to Royat, where the Rector was to take a course of waters, which was to secure him an immunity from gout for the best part of a year, until the "cure" season came round again and the London physicians had decided where he was to go. It would be Lilian's last journey as a spinster with her father and mother. She was to be married early in the coming year, and to take upon herself husband and parish—that parish of St. Lawrence the Martyr to which she had already attached herself, and whose schools, almshouses, dispensary, night-refuge, orphanage, and reading-room were as familiar to her as the morning-room at Helmsleigh Rectory.

It was her last morning at Hillersdon House, and she was breakfasting *tête-à-tête* with her brother, a rare pleasure, as Gerard had been very erratic of late, rarely returning home till the middle of the night, and not often leaving his own rooms till the middle of the day. He had been drinking deep of the cup of pleasure, as it is offered to youth and wealth in the height of the London season; but pleasure in his case had not meant debauchery, and the only vice to which late hours tempted him was an occasional hour's worship of the mystic number nine, or a quiet evening at piquet or poker. And in this drinking of the pleasure-chalice, he told himself that he was in no wise unduly consuming the candle of life, inasmuch as there was no pleasure which London could offer him that could stir his pulses or kindle the flame of passion. His heart beat no quicker when he held the bank at baccarat than when he sat over a book alone in his den. Time had been when an hour's play fired his blood, and set his temples throbbing; but to the millionaire loss or gain mattered little. There was only the pleasant exultation of success for its own sake, success which was no more delightful than if he had made a good shot at bowls on a summer lawn. He argued, therefore, that he was living soberly within himself, even when his nights were spent among the wildest young men in London, the frequenters of the after-midnight clubs and the late restaurants.

"How nice it is to have a quiet half-hour with you, Gerard!" said Lilian, as they began breakfast, he trifling with a devilled sardine, she attacking bread and butter and strawberries, while the *chef's* choicest breakfast dishes remained untouched under their silver covers.

"Yes, dear, and how soon such quiet hours will be impossible. I shall miss you dreadfully."

"And yet, although we have lived under the same roof we have seen very little of each other."

"True, but it has been so sweet to know you were here, that I had always a sympathetic listener at hand."

Lilian answered with a sigh.

"You have given me no confidences, Gerard."

"Have I not? Believe me it has been from no lack of faith in your honour and discretion. Perhaps it was because I had nothing to tell!"

"Ah, Gerard, I know better than that. You have a secret—a secret which concerns Mrs. Champion. I know she is something more to you than a commonplace friend."

Gerard laughed to himself ever so softly at his sister's naivete. "What, has your penetration made that discovery, my gentle Lilian?" he said. "Yes, Edith Champion and I are more than common friends. We were plighted lovers once, *dans le temps*, when we were both hopeful and penniless. Wisdom and experience intervened. The young lady was induced to marry an elderly money-bag, who treated her generously, and to whom her behaviour was perfect. I changed from lover to friend, and that friendship was never interrupted, nor did it ever occasion the slightest uneasiness to Mr. Champion."

"And now that Mrs. Champion is a widow, free to marry for love——" questioned Lilian, timidly.

"In all probability she will become my wife—when her mourning is over. Shall you like her as a sister-in-law, Lilian?"

"How can I do otherwise? She has always been so kind to me."

"Ah, I remember. She took you to her dressmaker. I believe that is the highest effort of a woman's friendship."

"How lightly you speak of her, Gerard, and how coldly—and yet I am sure you care for her more than for any one else in the world."

"Naturally, and she deserves my affection, after having remained constant to me through the interregnum of a loveless marriage."

"She is just the kind of woman you ought to marry. With her beauty and good style she will help you to maintain your position, and she will get rid of the friends whose influence I fear."

"Which of my friends, Lilian?"

"All those who come to this house, except Jack. Perhaps you will say Jack is no friend of yours, that you are not in touch with him, as you call it."

"He is my friend all the same. Granted that we differ in ethics and creed. I like him because he is straight, and strong, and true, and outspoken, and hearty—a man to whom I would turn in doubt and difficulty, in sickness or despair—a good, brave, honest man, Lilian, a man to whom I gladly give almost the dearest thing I have on earth, my only sister"

Tears sprang to Lilian's eyes at this praise of her lover. She could not answer in words for a few moments, but she stretched out her hand to her brother, and they sat hand clasped in hand.

"How happy I am," she faltered at last, "to have won him, and to have your love as well."

"And now tell me why you dislike my friends?"

"Because they seem to me all false and hollow—full of flowery words and shallow wit—arrogant, superficial, making light of all good men's creeds, dismissing noble lives and noble thoughts with a jest. Some of them are pleasant enough—Mr. Larose, for instance, with his elegant languor, and his rhapsodies about art and architecture—Mr. Gambier, with his schemes for new novels, which he has the impertinence to tell me will be unfit for me to read."

"Poor Gambier! that is his harmless vanity. His most ardent desire is to be ranked with Zola and rejected by Mudie."

"There is one of your friends whose presence fills me with horror, and yet he has more winning manners than any of them."

"Indeed!"

"The man who laughs at everything. Mr. Jermyn."

"Jermyn the Fate-reader."

"He has never read my fate."

"No, he refused to make an attempt. 'There is a light in your sister's countenance that baffles augury,' he told me. 'If I were to say anything about her it would be that she was created to be happy—but in a nature of that kind one never knows what happiness means. It might mean martyrdom.' So you dislike Justin Jermyn?"

"It is not so much dislike as fear that I feel when I think of him. When I am in his society I can hardly help liking him. He interests and amuses me in spite of myself. But it is his bad influence upon you that I fear."

"My dear Lilian, that is all mere girl's talk. Bad influence, bosh! You don't suppose that my experience of life since I went to the University has left my mind a blank sheet of paper, to be written upon by the first comer. Jermyn is a new acquaintance, not a friend, and his influence upon my life is nil. He amuses me—that is all—just as he amuses you, by his queer, gnomish ways and impish tricks. And now, before you go, tell me about Hester Davenport. You have been her friend for the last few weeks, and have lightened her burdens. What will she do when you are gone?"

"Oh, we shall write to each other. We are going to be friends all our lives, and when I am settled at the Vicarage we shall see each other often. She will come to St. Lawrence every Sunday to hear Jack preach."

"That is something for her to look forward to, no doubt; but in the meantime she is to go on with her drudgery, I suppose, without even the comfort of occasional intercourse with a girl of her own rank. Why could you not persuade her to accept an income from me, which would be, at least, enough to provide for her and her father?"

"I did not try very hard to overrule her decision, Gerard. In my heart I could only agree with her that she could take no such help from you, or from any one in your position. She could not sacrifice her independence by allowing herself to be pensioned by a stranger."

"I am not a stranger. I know her father's wretched story, and he was my father's curate. That does not make me a stranger. I don't think that either you or she can realise the position of a man with more money than he knows how to spend, who must inevitably squander a great deal of his wealth, waste thousands upon futile aims. Why should not such a man sink a few thousands to provide permanently for the comfort of a girl whose story has touched his heart? I would so settle the money that she would receive the income from year to year, without ever being reminded of its source. There would be no humiliation, no sense of obligation; the thing once done upon my part would be done for ever. Why should it not be?"

"Because she will not have it so. Call her proud, if you like—I admire her for her pride. She is content with the life she leads. She works hard, but she is her own mistress, and she is able to do her work at home and to watch over the poor old father, who would inevitably fall back into his dreadful ways if she were to leave him too much alone, or if they were more prosperous and he had the command of money. She has told me that their poverty is his salvation."

"A sorry prospect for a beautiful young woman, who under other circumstances might have society at her feet."

"She does not think of society, or consider herself a victim. You have no idea how simple-minded she is. I doubt if she even knows that she is lovely—or, if she does, she makes very light of her beauty. She told me that she had been poor all her life, and that nobody had ever made much of her, except her father."

"And you were able to do very little for her, it seems?"

"What you would think very little. I could not give her costly presents; her pride would have been up in arms at any attempt to patronise her. I gave her books and flowers; helped her to make that poor little lodging-house sitting-room as pretty and homelike as simple, inexpensive things could make it. We took some walks together in Battersea Park, and one lovely morning she went for a drive with me as far as Wimbledon, where we had a luncheon of buns and fruit on the common, just like two schoolgirls. She was as gay and bright that morning as if she had not a care in the world. I told her that she seemed happier than she had ever been at Helmsleigh, and she said that in those days she was oppressed by the knowledge of her father's sad failing, which we did not know; but now that we knew the worst, and that he seemed really to have reformed, she was quite happy. Indeed she has the bravest spirit I ever met with!"

"Yes, she is full of courage; but it is hard, very hard," said Gerard, impatiently: and then he began to question Lilian about her own arrangements, and there was no further allusion to Hester Davenport; but there was a sense of irritation in Gerard's mind when he thought over his conversation with Lilian in the solitude of his own den.

"How feeble women are at the best!" he said to himself, pacing to and fro in feverish unrest. "What petty notions of help, what microscopic consolations! A few books and flowers, a drive or a walk, a lunch of buns upon Wimbledon Common! Not one effort to take her out of that slough of despond—not one attempt to widen her horizon; a golden opportunity wasted, for Lilian might have succeeded where I must inevitably fail. If Lilian had been firm and resolute, as woman to woman, she might have swept away all hesitations, all foolish pride. But, no; she offers her humble friend a few flowers and a book or two, and hugs herself with the notion that this poor martyr is really happy—that the sewing-machine and the shabby lodging are enough for her happiness—enough for one who should be a queen among women. Why, my housemaids are better off—better fed, better lodged, with more leisure and more amusements. It is intolerable."

He had made up his mind that he would go no more to the little street in Chelsea. He had gone in the first place as an intruder, and had imposed himself upon the father's weakness, and traversed the daughter's wish, so plainly expressed to him on their first meeting. He hated himself for an act which he felt to be mean and unworthy, and he determined that after his formal visit as his sister's escort he would go there no more; yet two days after Lilian's departure an irresistible desire impelled him to try to see Hester again. He wanted to see if there were any justification for Lilian's optimistic view of the case—whether there were indeed peace and contentment in their humble home.

He went in the evening, at an hour when he knew Hester was to be found at home. However frugally she and her father might dine they always dined at seven, so that the old man should not suffer that uncomfortable reversal of all old habits which is one of the petty stings of poverty. The mutton chop or the little bit of fish which constituted his evening meal made a dinner as easily as it would have made a supper, and Hester took a pleasure in seeing that it was served with perfect cleanliness and propriety, a result only attained by some watchfulness over the landlady and the small servant. The modest meal was despatched in less than half-an-hour, and at half-past seven Hester and her father were to be found enjoying their evening leisure—he with his pipe, she with a book, which she sometimes read aloud.

So Gerard found them upon a delicious summer evening, which made the contrast between Queen's Gate and the poorer district westward of Chelsea seem all the more cruel. There all coolness and space and beauty, tall white houses, classic porticos, balconies brimming over with flowers, gaily-coloured blinds and picturesque awnings, the wide expanse of park and gardens, the cool glinting of water in the umbrageous distance; here long rows of shabby houses, where every attempt at architectural ornament seemed only to accentuate the prevailing squalor. And Hester Davenport lived here, and was to go on living here, and he with all his wealth could not buy her brighter surroundings.

He stopped at a bookseller's in the King's Road and bought the best copy of Shelley's poems which he could find, and at a florist's on his way he bought a large bunch of Marechal Niel roses, and with these gifts in his hand he appeared in the small parlour.

"As my sister is far away, I have ventured to come in her stead," he said, after he had shaken hands with father and daughter.

"And you are more than welcome, Mr. Hillersdon," answered the old man. "We shall miss your sister sadly. Her little visits have cheered us more than anything has done since the beginning of our troubles. I hardly know what we shall do without her."

"I am looking forward to next year, when Miss Hillersdon will be Mrs. Cumberland," said Hester, softly, "and when I am to help her with her parish work."

"Can you find time to help other people; you who work so hard already?"

"Oh, I shall be able to spare an afternoon now and then, and I shall be interested and taken out of myself by that kind of work. What lovely roses!" she exclaimed, as he placed the bunch upon the little table where her open book was lying.

"I am very glad you like them. You have other flowers, I see," glancing at a cluster of white and red poppies in a brown vase, "but I hope you will find room for these."

"Indeed, I will, and with delight. My poor poppies are put to shame by so much beauty."

"And I have brought—my sister asked me to bring you Shelley," he faltered, curiously embarrassed in the presence of this one woman, and laying down the prettily bound volume with conscious awkwardness.

"Did she really?" asked Hester, wonderingly; "I did not think Shelley was one of her poets. Indeed, I remember her telling me that the Rector had forbidden her to read anything of Shelley's beyond a selection of short poems. I dare say she mentioned some other poet, and your memory has been a little vague. Lilian has given me a library of her favourite poets and essayists."

She pointed to a row of volumes on one of the dwarf cupboards, and Gerard went over to look at them.

Yes, there were the poets women love—Wordsworth, Hood, Longfellow, Adelaide Proctor, Jean Ingelow, Elizabeth Barrett Browning—the poets within whose pages there is security from every evil image, from every rending of the curtain that shrouds life's darkest pictures, poets whose key-note is purity. No Keats, with his subtle sensuousness and heavy hot-house atmosphere. No Shelley, with his gospel of revolt against law, human and divine; no Rossetti, no Swinburne; not even Byron, whose muse, measured by the wider scope of latter-day poets, might wear a pinafore and feed upon the schoolgirl's bread and butter. The only giant among them all was the Laureate, and he was handsomely represented in a complete edition.

"I see you have no Shelley," said Gerard, "so my mistake was fortunate."

"But if Mr. Hillersdon would not let his daughter read Shelley——" began Hester.

"My worthy father belongs to a school that is almost obsolete—the school which pretends to believe that the human mind is utterly without individuality, or self-restraint, and that to read a lawless book is the first stage in a lawless career. You have too much mental power to be turned to the right or to the left by any poet, be he never so great a genius. Not to have read Shelley is not to have tasted some of the loftiest delights that poetry can give us. I am opening a gate for you into an untrodden paradise. I envy you the rapture of reading Shelley for the first time in the full vigour of your intellect."

"You are laughing at me when you talk of the vigour of my intellect," she said gaily. "And as for your Shelley, I know in advance that I shall not like him as well as Tennyson."

"That depends upon the bent of your mind—whether you are more influenced by form or colour. In Tennyson you have the calm beauty and harmonious lines of a Greek temple; in Shelley the unreal splendour and gorgeous colouring of the new Jerusalem as St. John pictured it in his ecstatic dreams."

They discussed Hester's poets freely, and went on to the novelists and essayists with whom she was most familiar. Dickens and Charles Lamb were first favourites, and for romance Bulwer.

Thackeray's genius she acknowledged, but considered him at his best disheartening.

"I think for people with whom life has gone badly Carlyle's is the best philosophy," she said.

"But surely Carlyle is even more disheartening than Thackeray," objected Gerard. "His gospel is the gospel of dreariness."

"No, no, it is the gospel of work and noble effort. It teaches contempt for petty things."

They talked for some time, Mr. Davenport joining in the conversation occasionally, but with a languid air, as of a man who was only half alive; and there was an undercurrent of complaining in all he said, which contrasted strongly with his daughter's cheerful spirit. He spoke more than once of his wretched health; his neuralgic pains, which no medical man could understand or relieve.

Gerard stayed till past nine, would have lingered even later if Hester had not told him that she and her father were in the habit of walking for an hour in the coolness of the late evening. On this hint he took up his hat and accompanied father and daughter as far as Cheyne Walk, where he left them to walk up and down in the summer starlight, very lonely in the great busy city, as it seemed to him when he bade them a reluctant good night.

"How lovely she is, but how cold!" he thought, as he walked homeward. "She is more like a picture than a living, suffering woman. The old man's reformation sits uneasily upon him. Poor wretch, I believe he is longing for an outbreak—would sell half his miserable remnant of life for a short spell of self-indulgence."

Gerard pondered much upon Davenport's so-called reformation, in the sincerity of which he had scanty faith.

It was only because he was penniless that he was sober—the longing for alcohol was perhaps as strong as it had ever been. If any stroke of luck were to fill his pockets he would break out again as badly as of old. It was on this account, doubtless, that his daughter was content to live upon a pittance. Poverty meant the absence of temptation.

After this Gerard Hillersdon spent many an evening hour in the Davenport menage. He supplied Hester with books and choicest flowers, he took newspapers and hot-house grapes to the old man, who ate the grapes with a greedy relish, as if he caught faint flavours of the vintages of Bordeaux and Burgundy in that English fruit. His visits and his gifts grew to be accepted as a matter of course. Books were Hester's one pleasure, and she often sat reading late into the night, although she was generally at her sewing-machine before eight o'clock in the morning. She was not one of those people who require seven or eight hours' sleep. Her rest and recreation were in those midnight hours when her father was sleeping, and she was alone with her books, sitting in a low wicker chair bought for a few shillings from an itinerant basket-maker, in the light of the paraffin reading lamp, which her own skilful hands prepared every morning.

Gerard wondered at her placid acceptance of this life of toil and monotony. Again and again as he walked slowly up and down the shadowy promenade by the river he had sought by insidious questionings to discover the lurking spirit of revolt against that Fate which had doomed her to life-long deprivations. No word of complaint was ever spoken by those beautiful lips, pale in the moonlight. The London season had passed her by, with all its pleasures, its smart raiment, and bustle of coaching meets and throng of carriages and riders in that meeting of the ways by Albert Gate whither her footsteps had so often taken her. She had seen women, infinitely inferior to herself in all womanly graces, set off and glorified by all the arts of costume and enamel, dyed hair and painted eyebrows, into a semblance of beauty, and queening it upon the strength of factitious charms: and yet no sense of this world's injustice had embittered her gentle spirit. Patience was the key-note of her character. If every now and then upon her lonely walks a man stopped as if spell-bound at a vision of unexpected beauty, or even turned to follow her, she thought only of his unmannerliness, not of her own attractions; and evil as are the ways of men few ever ventured to follow or to address her, for the earnest face, and the resolute walk, told all but the incorrigible snob that she was a woman to be respected. No, she had never rebelled against Fate. All that she asked from life was the power to maintain her father in comfort, and to prevent his return to those degrading habits which had made the misery of her girlhood.

August was half over, West End London was a desert, and still Gerard lingered, Gerard the double millionaire, whom all the loveliest spots upon this earth invited to take his pleasure at this holiday season. His friends had bored him insufferably with their questions and suggestions before they set out upon their own summer pilgrimages. Those mysterious diseases of which one only hears at the end of the season had driven their victims in various directions, sympathetically crowding to the same springs, and sunning themselves in the same gardens. The army of martyrs to eczema and gout were boring themselves insufferably in Auvergne—the rheumatics were in Germany—the weak chests and shattered nerves were playing tennis at Maloja or St. Moritz—the shooting men were in Scotland, the fishermen were in Norway—the idlers, who want only to wear fine clothes, do a little baccarat, and dabble in summer wavelets, were at Trouville, Etretat, Paramé, Dinard, or Dieppe. For any man deliberately to stay in London after the twelfth, was an act so perverse and monstrous that he must needs find some excuse for it in his own mind. Gerard's excuse was that he was not a sportsman, had shot all the grouse he ever wanted to shoot, that he had seen all of the Continent that he cared to see, and that he felt himself hardly strong enough for travelling. The quiet of his own house, uninvaded by visitors, pleased him better than the finest hotel in Europe, the marble staircases and flower gardens of the Grand Bretagne at Bellaggio, or the feverish *va-et-vient* of the comfortable Schweitzerhof at Lucerne. He wanted rest, and he got it in his own rooms, where his every caprice and idiosyncrasy found its expression in his surroundings.

Why should he leave London? He had invitations enough to have made a small octavo volume, if he had cared to bind and perpetuate that evidence of the worship which Society offers to Mammon, invitations worded in every form and phrase that can tempt man's vanity or minister to his self-esteem. Invitations to castles in Scotland, to moated granges in Warwickshire, to manor houses and shooting-boxes in Yorkshire—to the wolds and moors of the north, to Dartmoor and Exmoor, to Connemara and Kerry, to every point of the compass in the British Isles, and even to chateaux in France, and hunting-lodges in Servia, Bohemia, Hungary, and heaven knows where. And every one of these invitations, many of them backed with playful allusions to daughters who for this or the other of his various accomplishments—tennis, chess, music, sketching—were especially eager for his society, every one of these invitations he knew was addressed not to himself but to his millions. This adulation filled him with unspeakable scorn; nor if the invitations had been prompted by the most genuine friendliness would he have accepted one of them. Why should he fall in with other people's habits, or share in pleasures not originated by himself, he who could live his own life—carry his own retinue with him wherever he cared to go—charter the finest yacht that had ever been launched—hire the most luxurious of shooting-boxes, castles, or chateaux—and take existence at his own measure, knowing no ruler but the caprice of the hour?

His answer to all these hospitable offers was a polite refusal. His health was too precarious to permit his enjoyment of visits which would otherwise be most agreeable. These refusals were written by his secretary and elicited much comment upon the insolence of the newly rich, and from the masculine recipients various unfriendly allusions to beggars on horseback.

Thus August drew towards a sultry close and the newspapers, no longer absorbed by Parliamentary reports, dressed themselves in the feathers of the screech owl and devoted a daily column to cholera, while the livelier and more discursive papers took up some topic of the hour, social or domestic, and opened their pages to a procession of letters upon the thrilling question of what we shall do with our empty sardine tins, or is the stage a safe profession for clergymen's daughters, or how to enjoy three weeks' holiday for a five-pound note. If Gerard Hillersdon had no longing for change from arid and overbaked streets he was perhaps the only person in town whose thoughts did not turn with fond longing towards shadowy vales and running streams, towards mountain or sea. Even Hester's resigned temper was stirred by this natural longing. "How lovely it must be up the river in this weather!" she said one evening when Gerard was strolling by her side under the trees of Cheyne Walk. Her father was with them. In all Gerard's visits he had never found her alone—not once had they two talked together without a listener, not once had their eyes met without the witness of other eyes. A passionate longing sometimes seized him as they paced soberly up and down in the summer moonlight, a longing to be alone with her, to hold her hands, to look into her eyes, and search the secrets of her heart with ruthless questioning—but never yet had that desire been gratified. Once on a sudden impulse he called at the Chelsea lodging-house in the afternoon, knowing that her father often spent an hour or two before dinner at the Free Library, but the landlady who opened the door told him that Miss Davenport was at her work, and must on no account be disturbed.

"You can at least tell her that I am here, and would be glad to see her, if only for a few minutes," said Gerard, and as he had given the woman more than one handsome douceur, she went into the parlour and gave his message.

She returned almost immediately to say that Miss Davenport was engaged upon work that had to be finished that afternoon, and she could not leave her sewing-machine.

The click, click of the hated wheel was audible while the woman delivered her message, and Gerard left the threshold, angry with Fate and life—angry even with the girl who had denied herself to him.

"It is pride, obstinacy, heartlessness," he told himself, in his disappointment. "She knows that I adore her—that I can make her life one summer holiday; that I hold the master-key to all the world contains of beauty or of pleasure; and yet she goes on grinding that odious wheel. She would rather be the drudge of a German tailor than the ruler of my life."

It was while he was in this embittered state of mind that he found himself face to face with Justin Jermyn, only a few paces from Mr. Davenport's door.

"I thought you were in the Hartz Mountains," he said, annoyed at the encounter.

"I have been there—have tramped with my knapsack on my back, like a student from Heidelberg or Gottingen, have drunk the cup of pleasure at roadside inns, dozed through a long summer day on the Brocken, and dreamt of Mephisto and the witches. But one day a fancy seized me to come back to London and hunt you up. I heard from Roger Larose that you had turned hermit, and were living secluded in the house he built for you—and I, who am something of the hermit myself, felt drawn to you by sympathy. Was that Gretchen's wheel I heard just now, as I passed the house where you were calling?"

"I have no idea what you may have heard; but I should like to know what brings you to this particular neighbourhood."

"Curiosity, and a fast hansom. I saw you driving this way as I stood waiting to cross the road at Albert Gate, with the intention of calling upon you. Useless to go to your house when you were driving away from it, so I hailed a hansom, and told the driver to keep yours in view—and so the man drove me to the corner of this street, where I alighted from my hansom just as you dismissed yours. I passed the house yonder on the opposite side of the way while you were talking to the landlady, who took her own time in opening the door. You were too much absorbed to notice me as I went by, and through the open window I saw a girl working at a sewing-machine—a pale, proud face, which flushed crimson when the woman announced your visit."

"And you expect me to endure the insolence of this espionage? Whatever your gifts may be, Mr. Jermyn, whether you excel most as prophet, necromancer, or private detective, I must beg you to exercise your talents upon other subjects, and to give me a wide berth."

Justin Jermyn responded to this reproof with a hearty laugh. "Nonsense," he said, "you pretend to be angry, but you are not in earnest. Nobody is ever angry with me. I am a privileged offender. I am everybody's jester. Let me be your fool. Give me the privileges that emperors of old gave to their jesters. You will find me at worst a better companion than your own thoughts."

"They are gloomy enough at the present moment," said Gerard, subjugated at once by that unknown influence which he had never been strong enough to resist.

He knew not what the force was by which this young man mastered him, but he knew that the mastery was complete. He was Justin Jermyn's *chose*—to be bent this way or that.

"You are unhappy," cried Jermyn. "You, with the one lever which can move the world under your hand. Absurd. If you have wishes, realise them. If any man stands in the way of your desire, buy him. All men are to be bought—that is an old axiom of Prime Ministers—from Wolsey to Walpole—and almost all women. You are a fool to waste yourself upon unfulfilled desires, which mean fever and unrest. You have the *peau de chagrin*—the talisman of power—in your banking account."

"Yes, the *peau de chagrin*—we may take it as an allegorical figure to represent the power of money in an age of advanced civilisation—but while I possess the power I have to remember the penalty. With every passionate desire fulfilled the talisman shrinks, and the possessor's life dwindles."

"No, my friend, it is our unfulfilled desires that shorten our lives—our ambitions never realised—our hopeless loves. With realisation comes satiety, and satiety means rest. The peril lies in the aching hunger of the wish, not in its fruition."

CHAPTER XV.

"A MAN CAN HAVE BUT ONE LIFE AND ONE DEATH."

Of all the men he knew, Justin Jermyn was the last whom Gerard would have deliberately chosen for a confidant and counsellor. He had an innate dread of the man, thought him false, tricky, and uncanny, half a charlatan, and half a fiend; and yet he was drawn towards him by such an irresistible magnetism, and was at this time so sorely in need of some friendly ear into which his egotism could pour its complainings, that, after trying to shake off Jermyn by absolute incivility, he ended by walking as far as Barnes Common with him, where they sat on a furzy hillock in the sweltering August afternoon, and smoked and talked in a lazy, desultory fashion.

So far they talked only of people who were indifferent to both. Jermyn had a scathing tongue about men and women—but, being a man, was naturally most malignant in his estimate of the weaker sex.

"I believe the generality of men hate all women except the one woman they adore," said Gerard, meditatively. "There is a natural antagonism in the sexes, as between dog and cat. Turn a little girl loose into a playground of small boys, and if it were not for fear of the schoolmaster, there would be no more of her after an hour's play than of Jezebel when the dogs ate her. Every boy's hand would be against her. They would begin by pulling her hair and tripping her up, and then the natural savage in them would go on to murder. Look at the way the Sepoys treated women in the Indian Mutiny! That devilish cruelty was only the innate hatred of the sex which asserted itself at the first opportunity. And your talk about Mrs. Fontenelle and the pretty Miss Vincent is only the civilised development of the same malignity."

"Perhaps," agreed Jermyn. "But for my own part I am rather fond of women in the aggregate, as entomologists are fond of butterflies. I like them as specimens. I like to pin them down upon cork and study them, and make my guesses about their future, by the light of their antecedents."

"And you do not believe in the unassailable honour of good women?"

"Not in honour for honour's sake. There are women who elect to go through life with an unspotted reputation, for pride's sake, just as an Indian fanatic will hold his arms above his head until they stiffen and wither, for the sake of being looked up to by his fellowmen. But honour for honour's sake, honour in a hovel where there is no one to praise—honour in the Court of a Louis the Great or a Charles the Little—that kind of honour, my dear Hillersdon, is beyond my belief. Remember I am of the world worldly. My intellect and my opinions are perhaps the natural product of a society in its decadence."

"And do you think that a good woman—a woman whose girlhood has been fed upon all pure and holy thoughts, whose chosen type of her sex is the mother of Christ—do you think that such a woman can survive the loss of reputation, and yet be happy?"

"Assuredly, if she obtain a fair equivalent—a devoted lover, or a life of luxury, with a provision for her old age. The thorn among the roses of vice is not the loss of honour, but the apprehension of poverty. Anonyma, lolling on the silken cushions of her victoria, shivers at the thought that all the luxuries which surround her may be as short-lived as the flowers in the park borders, for a season, and no more. Believe me, my dear Hillersdon, we waste our pity upon these ladies when we picture them haunted by sad memories of an innocent girlhood, of their parish church, the school-house where they taught the village children on Sunday mornings, of broken-hearted parents, or sorrowing sisters. Ways and means are what these butterflies think about when their thoughts travel beyond the enjoyment of the hour. The clever ones contrive to save a competence, or to marry wealth. The stupid ones have their day, and then drift to the gutter. But conscience—regrets—broken hearts! Dreams, my dear Hillersdon, only dreams."

A chance hansom took the two young men back to town, and on nearing Queen's Gate Gerard invited his companion to dine with him. There was nothing new or striking in Justin Jermyn's discourse, but its cheap cynicism suited Gerard's humour. When a man is set upon evil, nothing pleases him better than to be told that evil is the staple of life—that the wickedness which tempts him is common to humanity itself, and can not be wicked because it is incidental to human nature.

They dined *tête-à-tête* in the winter-garden, where the warm air rustled among the palm leaves, and the atmosphere was full of the scent of roses, climbing roses, standards, dwarfs, which filled all the available space, and made the conservatory a garden of roses. The sliding windows in the lofty dome were opened, and showed a sky, starlit, profound, and purple, as if this winter-garden near Knightsbridge had been some palm grove in one of the South Sea isles. The dinner was perfection, the wines the choicest products of princely vineyards; and Hillersdon's guest did ample justice to both cuisine and cellar, while Hillersdon himself ate very little, and drank only soda-water.

"Fortune, which has favoured you so highly in some respects, has not blest you with a fine appetite," said Jermyn, when he had gone steadily through the menu, and had even insisted upon a second supply of a certain chaud-froid of ortolans.

"There is such a baneful sameness in food and wines," answered Gerard. "I believe my *chef* is an artist who deserves the eminence he enjoyed with former masters—but his productions weary me. Their variety is more in name than in substance. Yesterday quails, to-day ortolans, to-morrow grouse. And if I live till next year the quails and ortolans and grouse will come round again. The earliest salmon will blush upon my table in January; February will come with her hands full of hot-house peaches and Algerian peas; March will offer me sour strawberries and immature lamb. The same—the same over and over again. The duckling of May—the green-goose, the turkey-poult, the chicken-turbot. I know them all. There is truer relish in a red herring which a working-man carries home to eat with his tea than in all the resources of a French cook, when once we have run through his gamut of delicacies. I remember my first Greenwich dinner—rapture—the little room overlooking the river, the open windows and evening sunlight, the whitebait, the flounder-souché, the sweetbreads, the iced moselle, food for the Olympian gods! But after many seasons of Greenwich dinners, how weary and hackneyed is the feast!"

"You have possessed your millions little more than a year, and already you have learnt how not to enjoy," said Jermyn. "I must compliment you upon your progress."

"Ah, you forget, I knew all these things before I had my fortune—knew them in the days when I was only an umbra, knew them in other people's houses. Money can buy hardly anything for me that has freshness or novelty, any more than it could for Solomon, and I have no Queen of Sheba to envy me my splendour until there is no more spirit in her. Nobody envies a millionaire his wealth nowadays. Millionaires are too common. They live in every street in Mayfair. To be worth anybody's envy a man should have a billion."

"You begin to find fault with the mediocrity of your fortune?"

said Jermyn, with his pleasant laugh at human folly. "A little more than a year ago you were going to destroy yourself because you were in pecuniary difficulties—harassed by tailors and bootmakers. In another year you will be charging the same revolver to end an existence that leaves you nothing to live for. Solomon was not so foolish. Indeed, I think that great king was simply the most magnificent humbug that the history of the world offers to the contemplation of modern thinkers—a man who could philosophise so exquisitely upon the vanity of human life, and yet drain the cup of earthly pleasures—sensual, artistic, intellectual—to the very dregs! Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; and, behold! the slave market sends its choicest beauties to the king. Vanity of vanities, and lo! the ships come into port laden with apes and ivory, with Tyrean purple and the gold of Ophir, for the king; and the building of the mighty temple yonder on the holy hill affords a perpetual interest and an inexhaustible plaything for the man who calls the grasshopper a burden. I'll wager that in Jerusalem they called that gorgeous temple Solomon's Folly, and laughed among themselves as the great king's litter went up the hill, with veiled beauty sitting in the shadow of the purple curtains, and little slippered feet just peeping out among the embroidered cushions. Solomon in all his glory! I think, Hillersdon, if I were as rich as you, the thing I should feel most keenly would be that my money could not buy me back one gleam of the glory of the past—not half an hour with the guerilla leader David, among the wild hills, not one glimpse of Jerusalem when Solomon was king, not a night with Dido, or a dinner with Lucullus. We may imitate that gorgeous past, but we can never recall it. Billions would not buy it back for us. All the colour and glory of life has faded from an earth that is vulgarised by cheap trippers. From Hounslow to the Holy Land one hears the same harsh, common voices. German and Yankee accents drown the soft Tuscan of the Florentine in the Via Tornabuoni, tramloads of Cockneys rush up and down the hills of Algeria, camel-loads of vulgarity from London and New York pervade the desert where Isaiah wandered alone beneath the stars. The hill where the worshippers of Baal waited for a sign from their god, the Valley of Jehoshaphat, are as banal as Shooter's Hill or the Vale of Health. The spirit of romance has fled from our vulgarised planet, and not a milliard of golden sovereigns could tempt her back for an hour!"

"I should be content to let the past go, if I could be happy in the present. That is the difficulty."

"Oh, I am always happy. I have fancies, but no passionate longings. My only troubles are climatic. While I can follow the sunshine I am content."

"If you have finished your wine let us go to my den," said Gerard, who had allowed his companion's rodomontade to pass by him like the faint breath of evening wind among the palm leaves, while his own thoughts travelled in a circle. "We can't talk freely here. I feel as if there were listeners in the shadowy corners behind those tree ferns."

"To your den with all my heart."

They went upstairs to the room where Gerard's talisman was fixed against the wall, behind a Japanese curtain. He had not lifted the curtain since the night when he first met Hester Davenport, and when the tremulous line which his pen made upon the paper showed him that a disturbing element had entered into his life.

To-night he flung himself into his accustomed chair wearily, and a heavy sigh escaped him, as he pushed aside the books upon the table in front of him, and looked at the face of his betrothed in the photograph.

Jermyn was walking round the room looking at everything with an amused air.

"So like my old rooms," he said, "I feel quite sorry as I look at the things. Mine are sold, dispersed, vanished into thin air. I gave up those old Inn chambers—too uncanny for a man of cheerful temperament. I have a *pied à terre* in Paris now."

"What part of Paris?"

"Ah, I never tell my address. That is one of my idiosyncrasies. But if ever I meet you on the boulevard after the theatres have closed, I will take you to my den to supper, and will give you Margot or Lafitte as good as the Madeira you liked that night in the old Inn. By Jove, my image in black marble! How did you come by it?"

The image was a bust of Pan, and the features and expression of the god were the features and expression of Justin Jermyn. Allow for the phantasy of goat's ears, and the bust was as fine a likeness of the Fate-reader as portraiture could have achieved under the happiest conditions.

"Who is the sculptor?" asked Jermyn, hovering over the bust with childish pleasure.

"It is an antique from Sir Humphrey Squanderville's collection.

I found it at Christie's the other day, and I bought it as the best substitute I could get for that black marble bust which I saw in your rooms."

"You must be very fond of me, Hillersdon, to have set up my image in your sanctum."

"Fond of you! Not in the least. I have a horror of you—but I like your society, as a man likes opium. It has a foul taste, and he knows it is bad for him; yet he takes it—craves for it—must have it. I could not rest till I had your likeness; and now that grinning mouth of yours is always there to mock at my heartache, my doubt, my despair. That broad smile of sensual enjoyment, that rapture in mere animal life, serve me as a perpetual reminder of what a poor creature I am from the pagan point of view—how utterly unable to enjoy life from the Pantheist's standpoint, how conscious of man's universal heritage—death."

> "'Death is here and death is there,
> Death is busy everywhere,'"

quoted Jermyn. "Cheerful poet, Shelley; an exquisite harper, but a good deal of his harping was upon one string—death, dust, annihilation. It would have been simply inconsistent if he had lived to be as old as Wordsworth. But why should my image," posing himself beside the bust, and laying his long white hand affectionately upon the sylvan god's crisp forelock, "remind you of dismal things? My prototype and I have the spirit which makes for cheerfulness?"

"Your very cheerfulness accentuates my gloom."

"Gloomy! With youth and good looks, and ninety thousand a year."

"More than enough for happiness, perhaps, if I had the freehold; but I am only a leaseholder, and I know not how short my lease may be. I have pretty good reason to know that it is not a long one. Yes, I know that, Justin Jermyn. I know that these things belong to me as the dream-palace belongs to the dreamer who fancies himself a king."

"Make the most of your opportunities while they last. To be as rich as you are—and to be young—is to command the world. There is not a flower in the garden of life that you cannot pluck."

"You are wrong. I am tied and hampered. I see before me one—and only one—chance of supreme happiness, and yet I dare not grasp it."

And then in a gush of confidence, in the passionate egotism that must talk of self, he told this man whom he distrusted the inmost secrets of his heart—told him how he had been moved by the sight of Hester's face on the platform in the concert-hall, and how from that night he had struggled in vain against the attraction which drew him towards her. He told Jermyn everything—his intrusion upon her life, albeit he knew her desire to avoid all friends of the past—told of those quiet hours in the humble lodging, those unalarming gifts of flowers and books—told of those slow pacings by the river, with the old father always at her side—pouring out his soul to this man whom he doubted and feared as freely as a girl tells her story of hopeless love to a trusted sister.

"We have never been alone together since that first night in Eaton Square. I have never dared even to hold her hand in mine with a lingering clasp, and yet when our hands touch there is a fire that runs through my veins, till heart and brain are fused in that passionate flame, and I can scarce shape the words that bid her good-bye. Our talk has been only of commonest things. I have never by look or word dared to express my love—and yet I think she knows I love her. I think that when my heart leaps at the sound of her voice or the touch of her hand her heart is not cold. I have seen her lips tremble in the faint evening light when we have walked side by side under the trees. I have felt that there was eloquence in her silence, in her faltering replies. Yes, I know she loves me."

"What more do you want—knowing that? Are you going to leave her at her sewing-machine, when you can make her life one blissful holiday?"

"She is not a woman to be had for the asking. Would you advise me to fling every worldly consideration to the winds, and marry her?"

"You cannot marry everybody," replied Jermyn, with a practical air, "and I take it you are irrevocably pledged to the lady yonder," pointing to the gold and lapis lazuli frame—a gem of jeweller's work—on the writing-table.

"Yes, I am pledged to her."

"In any case the world expects you to marry her—and it will go rather hard with her—from a society point of view, if you don't. But perhaps you care very little what the world says about Mrs. Champion?"

"I care very much. I am bound to care for her reputation, and for her feelings. Till she, of her own free will, release me, I am bound to her by every tie that can bind a man of honour."

"So!" exclaimed Jermyn, "that means a good deal."

"It means not one syllable to Edith Champion's discredit," answered Hillersdon, hotly. "She was a faithful wife to her husband, and I knew how to respect her position as his wife, although I had been her adoring lover. During the three years of her married life we were friends, and friends only. It may be that we both counted on the days when she would be free, and when the thread of the old story might be taken up again just where we dropped it."

"And now she is free, and you seem hardly to have taken up the thread."

"It is her fault," said Hillersdon, angrily. "She is beautiful, generous, loves me with all her heart; but she is fettered by petty laws which brave women laugh at. She ran away from me just when my salvation lay in her society. I wanted to hold fast by my first love. I wanted to live all my life in her company, to lure back the loves and graces that had fluttered away, to forget that there was another lovely or lovable woman upon this earth; but she told me that people would talk, and that it was better we should see very little of each other until the period of conventional grief was past, and I could decently make Champion's widow my wife. So she is sketching snow-peaks at Murren while——"

"While you are over head and ears in love with Hester Davenport."

"It is more than love; it is possession. My world begins and ends with her. I tried to run away, tried to start for Switzerland, to follow my betrothed to her mountain retreat, in defiance of her objection; but it was a futile effort. I was at the station; my servant and portmanteau were on the platform; and at the last moment my resolution failed. I could not place myself beyond the possibility of seeing the face I worship, of hearing the voice that thrills me."

"And you are content to go on seeing the lovely face and hearing the thrilling voice in the presence of a third person? Isn't that rather like being in love with a ward in Chancery, and courting her in the presence of the family lawyer? Why don't you get rid of the old man?"

"That's not as easy as you suppose. You saw me sent away from Hester's door to-day. She will not receive me in her father's absence, and I am not such a cad as to force myself upon her seclusion. I behaved badly enough in the first instance when I acted in direct opposition to her wish."

"To her alleged wish. Do you think a woman is ever quite candid in these cases, either to her lover or to herself? Look at Goethe's Gretchen, for instance, somewhat snappish when Faust addresses her in the street, but a few hours after, in the garden! What had become of the snappishness? She is ocean deep in love, ready to throw herself into the lover's arms. I can't conceive how you can have gone on with this idle trifling, like an undergraduate smitten by a boarding-school miss. You with your millions, your short lease of life, your passionate desire to make the most of a few golden years. Strange to what hopeless fatuity love can reduce its victim! Get rid of the old father, make a clean sweep of him, and then at least the coast will be clear, and you need not confine your love-making to half-an-hour's crawl upon the Embankment."

"How get rid of him? There's the difficulty. He has been reformed by her care, and it is the business of her life to make his declining years happy. Nothing would induce her to part with him."

"Perhaps not; but very little would induce him to part with her. Do you suppose that he is not tired of his present life? Do you know what reform means in the habitual drunkard? It means deprivation that makes existence a living death. It means a perpetual craving, a thirst as fierce as that which racks the parched traveller in the African desert, the perishing sailor after a week scorched upon a raft in mid-ocean: only it is the thirst for alcohol, for fire instead of water. To his daughter this poor wretch may pretend resignation, but you may be sure he is miserable, and will resume his darling vice at the first opportunity."

"And you would suggest that I should find the opportunity, that I should fling him back into the Tophet from which his daughter plucked him. No, Jermyn, I am not so vile as that."

"I suggest nothing. Only if you want to win the daughter you must get the father out of the way; unless, indeed, you prefer to take the other line—throw over Mrs. Champion and make a formal offer for Miss Davenport's hand. No doubt the old man would be very proud of you as a son-in-law, though you might have some occasion to be ashamed of him as a father-in-law when the opportunities of an establishment like this should lure him back to his old habits."

"I have told you that I cannot break with Edith."

"And you will marry her next year, while you are still passionately in love with another woman?"

"I dare not think of next year. I may not live till next year. I can think only of the present, and of the woman I love."

"You are wise. A year is a long time, measured by a passion like yours. You have offered Davenport and his daughter an income through your sister. You have acted with most admirable delicacy, and yet your offers have been rejected. Have you ever offered Davenport money, directly—with the golden sovereigns or the crisp bank-notes in your hand?"

"Never. I would not degrade him by any such offer. And I believe that he would reject any gift of that kind."

"A gift perhaps, but not a loan. A man of that kind will always take your money if you humour his pride by pretending to lend it to him. Or there are other ways. He is a good classic, you say, or was so once. Let him write a book for you. A literary commission would be an excuse for giving him ample means for enjoying his evenings in his own way, and then your moonlit walks upon the Embankment would have the charm which such walks have when heart answers to heart."

"What a villain I should be if I were to take your advice and undo the work to which that heroic girl has devoted herself for the brightest years of her girlhood—those years which for the young lady in society mean a triumphant progress of dances and tennis-tournaments, and pretty frocks and adulation, a pathway of flowers. She has given all the brightness of her youth to this one holy aim, and you would have me undo her work."

"My dear fellow, the end is inevitable. I tell you that for the habitual drunkard there is no such thing as reformation. There is the semblance of it, while the sinner is cut off from the possibility of sin; but backsliding comes with opportunity, and the reaction is so much the more violent because of that slow agony of deprivation through which the sinner has been passing. I no more believe in Mr. Davenport's reform than the Broad Church believes that Joshua stopped the sun."

The conversation drifted into other channels. They discussed that great problem of man's destiny which is always being argued in some form or other. They asked each other that universal riddle which is always being answered and is yet unanswerable. In this line of argument Justin Jermyn showed an impish facility for shifting his ground; and at the end of an hour's argument Hillersdon hardly knew whether he was full of vague aspirations and vague beliefs in purer and better worlds beyond this insignificant planet, or whether his creed was blank negation.

It was late when they parted, and after the man himself was gone Gerard Hillersdon sat for a long time face to face with the marble image, the sly smile, the curious sidelong glance of the long narrow eyes seeming to carry on the argument, which the living lips had dropped, to strange and wicked conclusions.

"Wealth without limit," mused Gerard, "and so little power to enjoy—so brief a lease of life. Why, if I were sure of living to eighty or ninety I should still think it hard that the end must come—that it is inevitable—foreshadowed in the freshness of life's morning; stealing nearer and nearer with the ripening noon; hurrying with ever quickening pace in the twilight of life's evening, when the last sun-rays gild an open grave. Oh, that inevitable end—bane of every life, but most hideous where wealth makes existence a kind of royalty. I shudder when I read the wills of triple or quadruple millionaires. The riches remain—a long array of figures, astounding in their magnitude—and the man who owned all that gold is lying in the dark, and knows the end of all things."

He went over to the wall against which he had affixed his talisman, drew aside the curtain, and then stepped quickly back to the table and dipped his pen in the ink. It was the same large broad-nibbed pen with which he had drawn the last line upon the night after his interview with Hester Davenport. He dashed his pen upon the paper in a fury, and drew an inner line with one hurried sweep of his wrist. If determination could have assured firmness that line would have been bold and strong as Giotto's O; but the tracing was even weaker than the last, and might have been the effort of a sick man, so feebly did the line falter from point to point."

"Dr. South and Justin Jermyn are right," thought Gerard. "It is passionate feeling that saps the life of a man—most of all a hopeless passion—most of all a struggle between honour and inclination. I will see South to-morrow, and if he tells me the shadows are deepening upon the dial—if——"

The sentence remained unfinished even in his own mind. He spent a restless night, broken by brief slumbers and long dreams—vivid dreams in which he was haunted by the image of Nicholas Davenport, under every strange and degrading aspect. In one dream he was in his father's church at evensong in the quiet summer evening. He heard the organ and the voices of the village choir in the closing phrases of his mother's favourite hymn, "Abide with me:" and amidst the hush that followed the Amen he saw Nicholas Davenport lolling over the worn velvet cushions of the old-fashioned pulpit, gesticulating dumbly, mad with drink, but voiceless. There was no sound in the church after that tender closing phrase of the hymn. All that followed was silence; but as he looked at that degraded figure leaning out of the pulpit the church changed to the pit of hell, and the village congregation became an assembly of devils, and on the steps of Satan's throne stood a figure like Goethe's Mephistopheles, and the face under the little red cap with the cock's feather was the face of Justin Jermyn.

There was nothing strange in the fact that he should so dream, for he had long ago in his own mind likened the Fate-reader to Goethe's fiend.

Gerard drove to Harley Street before ten o'clock next morning, and was lucky in catching Dr. South, who was in London, *en passant*, having finished his own cure at Homburg, and being on the point of starting for a holiday at Braemar.

There were no patients in the waiting-room, as the doctor was supposed to be out of town, and on sending in his card Gerard was at once admitted to the consulting-room.

Dr. South looked up from his pile of newly-opened letters with a pleasant smile.

"My little patient of the Devonshire Rectory," he said cheerily; and then, with a keen look and a changed tone, he said, "But how is this, Mr. Hillersdon, you are not looking so well as when you were here last. I'm afraid you have been disregarding my advice!"

"Perhaps I have," Gerard answered gloomily. "You told me that in order to spin out the thin thread of my life I must only vegetate, I must teach myself to become a human jelly-fish, without passions or emotions, thought or desire."

"I did not forbid pleasant emotions," said Dr. South; "I only urged you to avoid those stormy passions which strain the cordage of the human vessel, and sometimes wreck her."

"You urged that which is impossible. To live is to feel and to suffer. I have not been able to obey you. I am passionately in love with a woman whom I cannot marry."

"You mean that the lady is married already?"

"No; but there are other reasons——"

"If it is a question of social inequality, waive it, and marry. You cannot afford to be unhappy. The disappointment which another man would get over in a year, might in your case have a fatal effect. You are not of the temper which can live down trouble."

"Tell me, frankly and ruthlessly, how long I have to live."

"Take off your coat and waistcoat," said the doctor quietly, and then, as his patient obeyed, he said, "I should be an impudent empiric if I pretended to measure the sands in the glass of life, but I can, if you like, tell you if your chances now are any worse than when you were with me last year. I remember your case perfectly, and even what I said to you at that time. I was especially interested in you as one of my little patients who had faith enough to come back to me in manhood. Now let me see," and the thoughtful head was bent to listen to that terrible tell-tale machinery we all carry about with us, ticking off the hours that remain to each of us in this poor sum of life. The downward bent brow was unseen by the patient, or he might have read his doom in the physician's countenance. When Dr. South looked up his features wore only the studied gravity of the professional aspect.

"Well," questioned Hillersdon, when the auscultation was finished, "am I much worse than when I was here last?"

"You are not any better."

"Speak out, for God's sake," cried Gerard, roughly. "I—I beg your pardon, doctor, but I want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, no making the best of a bad case. What is the outlook?"

"Bad."

"Shall I live a year—two—three years? How much do you give me?"

"With care—extreme care—you may live some years yet. Nay, I do not say that you might not last ten years; but if you are reckless the end may come quickly. Worry, agitation, fretting of any kind may hasten your doom. I am sorry to be obliged to tell you this."

"I thank you for having told me the truth. It settles one question, at least. I shall try to be happy my own way."

"Marry the woman you love, even if she is a housemaid," said the doctor, kindly, "and let her make your life happy in some quiet retreat, far from the excitements and agitations of the world of fashion or politics. You will go to the South, of course, before the winter. I should recommend Sorrento or Corsica. Your wealth will surround you with all the luxuries that make life easy wherever a man has to live."

CHAPTER XVI.

"HE IS THE VERY SOUL OF BOUNTY."

GERARD HILLERSDON left Harley Street almost persuaded to break faith with the woman he had loved for more than three years, and offer himself to the woman he had loved less than three months. But that one word "almost" lost the early Christian Church a royal convert, and Gerard had not quite made up his mind to marry Nicholas Davenport's daughter.

"So short a lease of life—and were I but happy with such a wife as Hester I might prolong my span to the uttermost," he told himself, and then that advocate of evil which every worldly man has at his elbow whispered, "Why marry her, when your wealth would enable you to make so liberal a settlement that she need never feel the disadvantage of a false position? Win her for your mistress, cherish and hide her from the eye of the world. To marry her would be to bring a drunken madman into the foreground of your life—to cut off every chance of distinction in the few years that may be left to you. A man in your position can be true to Esther without renouncing Vashti. And your Vashti has been loyal and constant. It would be the act of a villain to break faith with her."

As if to accentuate that evil counsel he found a letter from Vashti waiting for him on his study table—a letter upon which Vashti's image was smiling, beautiful in court plumes and diamonds. There was nothing new in her letter, but it stabbed him where he was weakest, and the writer dwelt fondly upon her trust in him, and upon that happy future which they were to lead together.

He dawdled away the summer noontide in his garden, smoking, and dreaming, and he drove to Rosamond Road, Chelsea, at the hour when he knew he was likely to find Nicholas Davenport alone. His horses and stablemen had been idle of late, as he always employed a hansom when he went to Chelsea—and the inquiry, "would the horses be wanted any more to-day?" was generally answered in the negative.

He found the old man dozing in his arm-chair, with the *Standard* lying across his knees. He looked pale and worn, the mere wreck of a man, his silvery hair falling in loose wisps over the high, narrow forehead. There were fresh flowers in the room, and all was exquisitely neat, from the books upon the dwarf cupboard to the muslin cover of the sewing-machine. Gerard seldom entered that room without being reminded of Faust's emotion in Gretchen's modest chamber—where, in the gentle maiden's absence, he felt her spirit hovering near him, her pure and innocent mind expressed in the purity and neatness of her surroundings.

He had time to glance round him, and to recall that scene—Ein kleines, reinliches Zimmer—before Nicholas Davenport started up out of his light slumber, and shook hands with him.

"This is uncommonly kind of you," said the old man. "These summer afternoons are infernally long when Hester is out of the way. And the papers are as dull as ditchwater—politicians on the stump all over the country—one Parliamentary machine thrashing his bundle of political corn at Leeds on Tuesday, and another machine thrashing the very same bundle of facts and fallacies, and prophecies that never come true, at Halifax! And so the ball rolls on."

"I dare say if we had lived at Athens we should have found politics just as great a bore, and orators no less windy," answered Gerard, lightly. "But you are not looking well, Mr. Davenport."

"I am feeling a little low to-day—the weather, perhaps," and here the old man sighed, and began to fold up his newspaper with the tremulous movement of hands that had never recovered the firmness or repose lost under the influence of alcohol. "To be candid with you, my dear Hillersdon, I am suffering from a profound misapprehension in one of the best of creatures. My daughter is an angel. Her devotion to me"—here the ready tears stole down his withered cheeks—"is beyond all praise; but she is a woman, and a young woman, and she doesn't understand my constitution, or the circumstances of my life. She has taken up temperance as a craze, and she thinks she is doing me a kindness by depriving me of every form of stimulant. She hugs herself with the idea that she has saved me from destruction, and she cannot see that she is reducing me to a state of weakness, mental and physical, which must result in imbecility or death."

He was so earnest, he looked so reduced and wretched a being that Gerard was inclined to believe him, and to doubt whether Hester's system might not be a mistake.

"It is hard for you, I dare say, to make so complete a change in your habits," he said doubtfully.

"Her mistake is in insisting upon total abstinence. I have not forgotten the past, Mr. Hillersdon. I have not forgotten the degradation and disgrace which I have brought upon myself in your father's church; but that unhappy exhibition was the outcome of long months of agony. I had been racked by neuralgia, and the only alleviation of my pain was the use of chloral or brandy. I have been free from neuralgic pain of late. My poor Hester is very careful of my diet, and takes the utmost care of my health after her own lights; but she cannot see how weak and depressed I am. She cannot understand the mental misery which a glass of sound port, twice a day, might cure."

"Surely Miss Davenport would not object to your taking a glass of port after your luncheon and your dinner?"

"You don't know her, my dear friend," said Davenport, shaking his head. "Women are always in extremes. She would begin to cry if she saw me with a glass of wine in my hand, would go on her knees to ask me not to drink it. She has taken it into her head that the least indulgence in that line would bring about a return to habits of intemperance, which I can assure you were never a part of my nature."

"I must talk to Miss Davenport, and induce her to let me send you a few dozen of fine old port, Cockburn's '57, for instance."

The old man's eyes gleamed as he heard the offer.

"You may talk to her," he said, "but she won't give way. She has made up her mind that my salvation depends upon living in her way. It is a hard thing for a man of my age to depend for subsistence upon a daughter's manual labour, to see a lovely girl wearing out her life at vulgar drudgery, and never to have sixpence in my pocket—hardly the means of buying a newspaper. She doles out her pence, poor child, as if they were sovereigns. Women have such narrow notions about money."

There was a silence of some minutes, during which Davenport nearly fell asleep again, and then Gerard said quietly—

"Why should you depend upon your daughter, even for pocket-money? Why not do something for yourself?"

"What can I do? I have tried to get copying work, but I could not write a clerk's hand. My penmanship was too weak and illegible to be worth even the starvation wages paid for that kind of work."

"I was not thinking of so poor an occupation. Have you tried your hand at literature?"

"I have, in more than one line, though I had no vocation, and wrote slowly and laboriously. The articles I sent to the magazines all came back, 'Declined with thanks.' My daughter was the poorer by so many quires of Bath post and so many postage stamps."

"You tried a wrong line, I dare say. Beginners in literature generally do. You are a good classic, I know."

"I was once, but the man who took his degree at Oxford thirty years ago is dead and gone."

"Men don't forget Homer or Virgil when they have once loved them with the scholar's fervour."

"Forget, no. One does not forget old friends. Quote me any line from Horace or Virgil—the most obscure—and I will give you the context. Those two poets are interwoven with the fabric of my brain. I used also to be considered a pretty good critic upon the Greek Dramatists. I once got half way through a translation of Œdipus, which some of my contemporaries were flattering enough to persuade me to finish. I laid the manuscript aside when I began parish work, and Heaven knows what became of it."

"The world has grown too frivolous to care for translations of Sophocles," replied Gerard, "but I believe there is room for a new Horace—that is to say a new version of some of the lighter satires—a version which should be for the present epoch what Pope's was for the time of Queen Anne; and I feel that it is in me to attempt the thing if I had the aid of a competent scholar—like yourself."

The old man's face lighted up with feverish eagerness.

"Surely your own Latin——" he began tremulously.

"Has grown sadly rusty. I want a new version of my favourite satires—a verbatim translation, reproducing the exact text in clear, nervous English, and upon that I could work, giving the old lines a modern turn, modulating the antique satire into a modern key. Will you collaborate with me, Mr. Davenport? Will you undertake the scholarly portion of the work?"

"It is a task which will delight me. The very idea gives me new life. Which of the satires shall we start with?"

"Shall we say the ninth in the first book? It gives such a fine opportunity for the castigation of the modern bore."

"Capital. I am proud to think that with so many translations ready to your hand you should prefer a new one by me."

"I want to avoid all published versions," answered Gerard, plausibly; as he opened a note-case.

The old man watched him with greedy eyes, and the weak lips quivered faintly. Did that note-case mean payment in advance?

The question was promptly answered. Gerard took out a couple of folded notes, and handed them to his future collaborator.

"You must allow me to give you two hundred pounds on account," he said. "You will then at least have the feeling that your scholarship is worth something, and that you are not wholly dependent on your daughter's labour."

The old man fairly broke down, and burst into tears.

"My dear young friend, your delicacy of feeling, your generosity overcome me," he faltered, clutching the notes with shaking fingers, "but I cannot—I cannot take this money." His hold of the notes tightened involuntarily as he spoke, in abject fear lest he should have to give them back. "I suspect your proposed translation is only a generous fiction—devised to spare me the sense of humiliation in accepting this munificent honorarium. I own to you that the work you propose would be full of interest for me. I perceive the opportunities of those satires—treated as freely as Pope treated them—the allusions, political, social, literary—and to a writer of your power—who have made your mark in the very morning of life by a work of real genius—the task would be easy."

"You will help me, then?" said Gerard, his hollow cheek flushing with a hectic glow.

"With all my heart, and to the utmost of my power," answered Davenport, slipping the notes into his waistcoat-pocket as if by an automatic movement. "Without conceit I think I may venture to say that for the mere verbal work you could employ no better hack."

"I am sure of that, and for much more than merely verbal work. And now, good day to you, Mr. Davenport. It is about your daughter's time for coming home, and she won't care to find a visitor here when she comes in tired after her walk."

"Yes, she will be here directly," answered the old man, starting as with some sudden apprehension, "and on second thoughts I would rather you did not tell her anything about our plans until they are carried out. When your book is published she will be proud, very proud, to know that her old father has helped in so distinguished a work; but in the meantime if you changed your mind, and the book were never finished, she would be disappointed; and then, on the other hand, I should not like her to know that I had so much money in my possession."

All this was faltered nervously, in broken sentences, while Mr. Davenport followed his patron to the door, and showed him out, eagerly facilitating his departure.

Gerard had dismissed his cab on arriving, and he walked slowly away towards the river, carefully avoiding that road by which Hester was likely to return. He was pale to the lips, and he felt like a murderer.

CHAPTER XVII.

"SO, QUIET AS DESPAIR, I TURNED FROM HIM."

GERARD called in Rosamond Road on the following evening at the hour when he had been accustomed to find Mr. Davenport reposing after his comfortable little dinner, and his daughter reading to him. To-night the open window showed him Hester sitting alone in a despondent attitude, with an unread book on the table before her.

She came to the door in answer to his knock.

"My father is out," she said. "He did not come home to dinner. He went out early in the afternoon while I was away, and he left a little note for me, saying that he had to go into London to meet an old friend. He did not tell me the friend's name, and it seems so strange, for we have no friends left. We have drifted away from all old ties."

"May I come in and talk with you?" Gerard asked. "I am so sorry you should have any cause for uneasiness."

"Perhaps I am foolish to be uneasy, but you know—you know why. I was just going for a little walk. It is so sultry indoors, and we may meet him." She took her hat from a peg in the passage, and put it on. "We are not very particular about gloves in this neighbourhood," she said.

He perfectly understood that she would not receive him in her father's absence, that even in her fallen estate, a work-girl among other work-girls, she clung to the conventionalities of her original sphere, and that it would not be easy for him to break through them.

They walked to the end of Rosamond Road almost in silence, but on the Embankment, with the dark swift river flowing past them, and the summer stars above, she began to tell him her trouble.

"You know how happy I have been," she said, "in a life which many girls of my age would think miserable and degraded."

"Miserable, yes; degraded, no. The most feather-headed girl in England, if she knew your life, would consider you a heroine."

"Oh, please don't make so much out of so little. I have done no more than hundreds of girls would do for a dear old father. I was so proud and happy to think that I had saved him—that he was cured of that fatal vice—and now, now I am full of fear that since yesterday, somehow or other, he has obtained the means of falling back into the old habit—the habit that wrecked him."

"What makes you fear this?"

"He insisted upon going out last night after dinner. He was going to the Free Library to look at the August magazines. I offered to go there with him. We used to read there of an evening in the winter, but since the warm weather began we have not done so. I reminded him how hot the reading-room would be with the gas, but he was unusually eager to go, and I could not hinder him. The worst sign of all was that he did not like my going with him, and when we had been sitting there for half-an-hour he seemed anxious to get rid of me, and reminded me of some work which he knew I had to finish before this morning. But for that work I should have stayed with him till he came home; but I could not disappoint my employer, so I left my father sitting engrossed in 'Blackwood,' and I hoped all would be well. He promised me to come straight home when the library closed, and he came home about the time I expected him, but one look in his face, one sentence from his lips told me that by some means or other he had been able to get the poison which destroys him."

"Are you not exaggerating the evil in your own imagination?" asked Gerard, soothingly. "After all, do you think that a few glasses too much once in a way can do your father any harm? He has seemed to me below par of late. He really may suffer from this enforced abstinence."

"Suffer! Ah, you do not know, you do not know! I may seem hard with him, perhaps, but I would give my life to keep him from that old horror—that madness of the past, which degraded a gentleman and a scholar to the level of the lowest drunkard in London. There is no difference—the drink madness makes them all alike. And now that some one has given him money all my care is useless. I cannot think who can have done it. I don't know of any so-called friend to whom he could apply."

"His letter tells you of an old friend——"

"Yes! It may be some one who has returned from abroad—some friend of years ago who knows nothing of his unhappy story, and cannot guess the harm that money may do."

"Pray do not be too anxious," said Gerard, taking her hand and lifting it to his lips.

She snatched the small cold hand away from him indignantly.

"Pray don't," she said. "Is this a time for idle gallantry, and to me of all people—to me who have to deal only with the hard things of this life?"

"No, Hester, but it is a time for love—devoted love—to speak. You know that I love you."

He took the poor little gloveless hand again and held it fast, and kissed the work-worn fingers again and again.

"You know that I love you, fondly, dearly, with all my soul. Hester, only yesterday my doctor told me that I have not many years to spend upon this planet—perhaps not many months. He told me to be happy if I could—happy with the woman I love, for my day of happiness must be brief even at the best. It is but a poor remnant of life that I offer, Hester, but it means all myself—mind and heart and hope and dreams are all centred and bound up in you. Since I have known you—since that first night under the stars when you were so hard and cold, when you would have nothing to say to me—since that night I have loved only you, lived only for you."

She had heard him in despite of herself, her free will struggling against her love, like a bird caught in a net. Yes, she loved him. Her desolate heart had gone to him as gladly, blindly, eagerly as his heart had gone to her. There had been no more hesitation, no more doubt than in Margaret in the garden, when in a sweet simplicity that scarce knew fear of shame, she gave her young heart to her unknown lover. Hester's love was just as pure, and fond, and unselfish; but she had more knowledge of danger than Goethe's guileless maiden. She knew that peril lay in Gerard Hillersdon's love—generous, reverential even, as it might seem. It was only a year ago that she had sat, late into the night, reading Clarissa Harlowe, and she knew how tender, how delicate, how deeply respectful a lover might seem and yet harbour the basest designs against a woman's honour.

"You have no right to talk to me like this," she said indignantly. "You take advantage of my loneliness and my misery. Do you think I can forget the distance your fortune has set between us? I know that you are bound to another woman—that you will marry a woman who can do you honour before the world. I know that in England wealth counts almost as high as rank, and that a marriage between a millionaire and a work-girl is out of the question."

"A lady is always a lady, Hester. Do you think your womanly dignity is lowered in my esteem because you have toiled to support your father—do you think there is any man in England who would not admire you for that self-sacrifice? Yes, it is true that I am bound in honour to another woman—to a woman whom I loved four years ago, and whom I thought this world's one woman—but from that first night when I followed you across the Park—when you sent me away from you so cruelly, the old love was dead. It died in an hour, and no effort of mine would conjure the passion back to life. I knew then how poor a thing that first love was—a young man's fancy for a beautiful face. My love for you is different. I should love you as dearly if that sweet face of yours was faded and distorted—if those sweet eyes were blind and dim. I should love you as the clerk loved the leper—with a passion that no outward circumstance could change."

They were walking slowly under the trees—in the warm darkness of a breathless August night. He had his arm round her, and though her face was turned from him she did not repulse him. She let his arm clasp her, and draw her nearer and nearer, till it seemed as they moved slowly under the wavering branches as if they were one already. Other obligations, the opinion of the world, the past, the future, what could these matter to two beings whose hearts beat throb for throb, in the sweet madness of newly-spoken love?

"Dearest, say you love me. I know it, I know it—only let me hear, let me hear it from those lips. Hester, you love me, you love me."

Her face was turned to him now—pale in that faint light of distant stars, dark violet eyes still darker in the shadow of night.

Their lips met, and between his passionate kisses he heard the faint whisper, "Yes, I love you—love you better than my life—but it cannot be."

"What cannot be—not love's sweet union—all our life, my poor brief life, spent together in one unbroken dream, like this, like this, and this——"

She wrenched herself out of his arms.

"You know that it cannot be—you know that you cannot marry me—that it is cruel to try to cheat me—with sweet words that mean nothing. No man ever kissed me before—except my father. You have made me hate myself. Let me go—let me never hear your voice again."

"Hester, is there no other way? Do you want the marriage law to bind us? Won't you trust in me—won't you believe in me—as other women have trusted their lovers, all the world over?"

"Don't," she cried passionately, "why could you not leave those words unspoken? Why must you fill my cup of shame? I knew those hateful words would come if ever I let you tell me of your love, and I have tried to hinder your telling me. Yes, I knew what your love was worth. You will keep your promise to the great lady—your sister told me about her—and you would let me lose my soul for your love. You have been trying to win my heart—so that I should have no power to resist you—but I am not so weak and helpless a creature as you think. Oh, God, look down upon my loneliness—motherless, fatherless, friendless—take pity upon me because I am so lonely. I have none but Thee."

She stood with clasped hands, looking skyward in the moonlight; sublime in her simple faith, even to the unbeliever.

"Hester, do you think that God cares about marriage lines? He has made His creatures to love as we love. Our love cannot be unholy in His sight—any more than the unwedded love of Adam and Eve in the Garden."

"He never made us for dishonour," she answered firmly. "Good night, Mr. Hillersdon—good night and good-bye."

She turned and walked quickly, with steady steps, towards Rosamond Road. A minute ago he had held her clasped close in his enfolding arms, had felt the tumult of her heart mixing with the tumult of his own—had counted her all his own, pledged to him for ever by those passionate kisses, those tears which mingled with his tears, tears of joy and triumph, the hysterical fervour of exultant love. And now she called him "Mr. Hillersdon," and turned her back upon him as coolly as upon any importunate adventurer—invincible in her purity, although she loved him.

Angry, despairing, his thoughts took a sudden turn—worthy of Lovelace. He told himself that he would diplomatise—*reculer pour mieux sauter.*

"Let me walk with you to your door at least," he said, "if it is to be good-bye."

She made no answer, and he walked by her side, watching her profile in the dim light. She had wiped away her tears, her hot blushes had faded to marble pallor, her lips were firmly set, as if the face were verily marble, delicately chiselled by some old-world sculptor.

"Hester, you are very cruel to me."

"It is you who are cruel. Most of all when you tried to trade upon my weakness, to frighten me by saying you have not long to live. That was the cruellest of all."

"But it is true, Hester—as true as that you and I are walking here side by side. When I first came into my fortune, knowing myself far from strong, I went to a dear old doctor who saved my life from a sharp attack of lung disease when I was a little boy. I saw him more than a year ago, and he was not particularly hopeful about me even then. He warned me that I must live carefully, that all strong emotions would tend to shorten my days. I saw him again yesterday, for I was bent on knowing the worst. He was all kindness and all truth. He told me that I had changed for the worse within the year that was gone, and that only by extreme carefulness could I prolong my life for a few years. And then he bade me go and be happy, as if that were such an easy thing to do."

"It must be easy for you to be happy. You have all the world to choose from," she said falteringly.

"A futile privilege if there is only one thing in the world that I want. Deny me that and you reduce me to misery."

"Did your doctor really say that you have but a few years to live?" she asked, and he knew by her voice that she was crying, though her face was averted. "Don't try to make me unhappy. I'm sure it is not true that he said so. Doctors don't say such things."

"Sometimes, Hester. Even a physician will tell the truth when he is hard pressed. My doctor spoke very plainly. It is only in a life of calm—which means a life of happiness—that I can hope to prolong my existence a few years—just the years that are best and brightest, when love lights them. If I am worried and unhappy my life will be a question of months instead of years. But if you do not care for me that makes no difference to you."

"You know that I care for you. Should I be speaking to you now—anxious about your health—after what you have said to me, if I did not care for you? If love were not stronger than pride, I should never have spoken to you again. But I am speaking to you to-night for the last time. Our friendship is at an end for ever."

"Our friendship never began, Hester. From the first I had but one feeling about you, and that was passionate love, which takes no heed of difficulties, does not forecast the future. I was wrong, perhaps, hampered as I am, to pursue you; but I followed where my heart led; I could not count the cost for you or for me. You are right—you are wise. We must part. Good night, dear love, and good-bye."

His tone was firm and deliberate. She believed him—believed that he was convinced, and that trial and temptation were over. She turned to him with a choking sob, put her hand in his, and whispered good-bye. Those two hands clasped each other passionately, but with briefest pressure. She hurried from him to the little iron gate, let herself in at the unguarded door—what need of locks and bolts when there was so little to tempt the thief?—and vanished from his sight.

He went back to the river side, and sat there for an hour or more watching the tide flow by, and thinking, thinking, thinking of the woman he loved and the brief span he had for love or for life.

"And she can believe that I renounce her—knowing that she loves me—having held her in my arms and felt her sweet lips trembling against my own in love's first kiss. How simple women are!"

It was eleven o'clock before he remembered that he had asked Jermyn to sup with him at midnight. He walked home, for his heated brain and throbbing pulses needed active movement. He walked faster than he had walked three or four years ago, when he was a strong man. He thought of many things upon his way through streets that were still full of traffic and busy life, and once or twice as he caught the expression of a passing face he saw a kind of wondering horror in strange eyes that looked at him.

"I must be looking miserably ill to-night," he thought, after one of those casual glances. "Perhaps I am even worse than Dr. South seemed to think me. He questioned me about my family history, and I rather shirked the subject—paltered with the truth—told him my father and mother are alive and well. But the history is bad all the same. Bad, decidedly bad. Two lovely young sisters of my mother faded off this earth before they saw a twentieth birthday, and an uncle I can just remember died at three and thirty. My family history won't justify a hopeful view of a bad case."

He supped with Jermyn, and sat late into the night, and drank deeper than his wont, and he told Jermyn the story of his love. Of his free will he would not have chosen Justin Jermyn for a confidant, and yet he poured out all his hopes and dreams, the whole history of his passion in all its weakness and all its strength to this man whose mocking cynicism continually revolted him. Yet it may be that the cynic's companionship was the only society he could have endured at this stormy period. The voice of conscience must be stifled somehow; and how could it be so easily drowned as by this spirit of evil which denied the existence of good, which laughed at the idea of virtue and honour in man or woman?

"If the first man who put a fence round a bit of land and called it his was an enemy to his fellow-men," said Justin Jermyn, "what of the first man who set up a narrow standard of conduct, a hard and fast rule of morality, and said by this standard and by this line and rule of mine shall men act and live for evermore, whether they be happy or miserable? Along this stony road, hedged in with scruples and prejudices, shall men tramp painfully to their dull and dreary end; yes, even while, in the fair open country on either side these thorny fences, joy and love and gladness beckon to gardens of roses and valleys fairer than Eden. Why torment yourself because you have given a foolish old man the means of indulging freely in his favourite vice—an innocent vice, since it hurts none but himself—whereby you have perhaps provided for him the happiest days of his life?"

"I have given him the means of breaking his daughter's heart," said Gerard, remorsefully.

"Skittles! No woman's heart was ever yet broken by a drunken father. It needs a nearer and dearer love than the filial to break hearts. All that Hester Davenport wants in this life is to be happy with the man she loves. The drunken father might prove a stupendous difficulty if you wanted to parade your divinity through the electric glare of the great world as Mrs. Gerard Hillersdon—but if you want her for your goddess, your Egeria, hidden from the glare and the din, the existence of her father, drunk or sober, is of little moment."

CHAPTER XVIII.

"LOST, LOST! ONE MOMENT KNELLED THE WOE OF YEARS."

GERARD let three whole days go by without making any attempt to see Hester. Lovelace himself could hardly have been more diplomatic. He was completely miserable in the interval, counted the hours, and wondered perpetually whether the woman he loved was hungering for his presence as he hungered for hers. He spent the greater part of the time with Jermyn; driving to Richmond one day to dine at the Star and Garter and sit late into the night, watching the mists rising in the valley, and the stars shining on the river; driving to Maidenhead on another day and loitering long upon the shadowy river, and sitting in a riverside garden smoking and talking half through the sultry summer night; and in this long *tête-à-tête* he sounded the uttermost depths of Justin Jermyn's godlessness and cheerful egotism.

"The one thing that I am certain of in this Rhadamanthine universe," said this philosophical worldling, "is that I, Justin Jermyn, exist; and this being my one certainty, I hold that my one duty—the duty I owe to myself—is to be happy, and to make the best of the brief span which I am to enjoy on this earth. Reason tells me that to be happy and to live long I must abjure passion—reason tells me that serenity of mind means health and prolonged life; and to this end I have learnt to treat life lightly, as a farce rather than a tragedy, and to give my affection neither to man nor woman—to be slave neither of friendship nor of love. A selfish philosophy, I grant you; but self is my only certainty."

"An admirable philosophy, if it were as easy to practise as to preach. And have you never loved?"

"Never, in the fashion that you call love. I have never been unhappy for a woman's sake."

"And the domestic affections—father, mother, family?"

"I never knew them. I was flung as a waif upon the world, reared upon charity, the architect of my own fortune—such as it is. I am like Hester Summerson in 'Bleak House.' My mother was my disgrace, and I was hers. I am at least so far a follower of St. Paul, that I owe no man anything. I sink the second part of the precept."

Gerard meditated upon Jermyn's character as he drove home, towards daybreak, the man himself slumbering by his side. It was perhaps only natural that a man cut off from all family ties, cheated of mother's love and father's friendship, a stranger to every bond of blood relationship, should have grown up to manhood heartless and passionless, should have trained himself to the settled calm of a philosophical egotism, attaining in the morning of life that immunity from all the pains and penalties of the affections which the average egotist only achieves in old age.

Gerard looked at the sleeper wonderingly, almost with envy. The fair pale face was unmarked by a line that told of anxious thought or deep feeling. The sleeper's lips were parted in a faint smile, as if even in sleeping he felt the sensuous pleasure of life on a fair summer morning—the perfume of flowers from a hundred gardens, the soft breath of the wind creeping up from the west, warm with the glow of last night's sunset. The joy of living! Yes, this man who loved no one enjoyed life in all its fulness; and he, Gerard, with two millions to spend, and, it might be, less than two years to spend them in, was miserable—miserable because of the cowardly incertitude which made him unable to take the straight and honourable road to happiness while the sinuous and evil way lay open to him.

He went to Chelsea at dusk on the third evening after Hester's tearful farewell. She came quickly to the door in answer to his knock, and he was startled at the change which three days had made in her. The first words she spoke told him that it was not love of him which had so altered her, but poignant anxiety about her father.

"He has never been home since that night," she said. "I have been in search of him at every place that I could think of as possible for him to have gone to, but I can hear nothing of him since Tuesday night—the night you were here. He was at the Swan Tavern that night, sitting in the coffee-room drinking brandy and water till the house closed. He was talking a good deal, and he was very excited in his manner when he left, but the people would not tell me if he had drunk much. They pretended not to know how much brandy had been served to him. I have been to the police office, and the river has been dragged along by the Embankment, where he and I used always to walk. They were very good to me at the police station, and they have promised to do all they can to find him, living or dead. But, oh"—with a burst of uncontrollable weeping—"I fear they will never find him alive. He could have had only a little money, and he must have spent it all on brandy, and then when he was mad with drink—ah, you don't know how drink maddens him—he may have walked into the river, or thrown himself in, miserable and despairing. He was at the Swan at eleven o'clock, only a few minutes' walk from the river, and I can find no one who saw him after that hour. I think he must have meant to come home—I don't think he would wilfully desert me—but some accident, some fit of madness——"

She could not speak for sobbing. Gerard led her into the parlour, where the old man's empty chair reminded him of that last interview, and of the snare he had set for a weak sinner's feet. Looked at in the light of Hester's grief to-night, and the awful possibilities she suggested, the thing which he had done seemed little short of murder.

"I will go to Scotland Yard, Hester," he said, eager to comfort her. "I will set the cleverest detectives in London at work, and it shall go hard if they don't find your father. My dearest, don't give way to these morbid imaginings. Be sure he is safe somewhere—only hiding because he feels he has disgraced himself in your eyes. He has been afraid to come home, knowing how grieved you would be at his backsliding. Be comforted, dear love." His arms were round her, and he drew the pale pinched face to his own, and again their lips met, but this time Hester's kiss was the kiss of despair. She clung to her lover in her grief and fear. She forgot the peril of such consolations.

What comfort could he give her about her father, except the assurance that all that money could do to find him should be done, and that once being found every possible means should be taken to ensure his welfare in the future. He told her that there were doctors who had made such cases their chief study, homes where her father could be surrounded with every luxury, and yet secured from the possibility of indulgence in his fatal vice. He showed her how happy and free from care her future might be if she would only trust her own fate and her father's to him. And then came words of love, burning words that have been spoken again and again upon this earth with good or evil import—words that may be true when the lips speak them, yet false within the year in which they are spoken—words that promise an eternity of love, and may be uttered in all good faith, and yet prove lighter than the thistledown wafted across summer pastures.

Three days ago she had been strong to resist the tempter, strong in womanly pride and maiden modesty. To-night she was broken down by grief, worn and fevered by sleepless nights, almost reckless in her aching misery. To-night she listened to those vows of love. What had she on this earth but his love, if the father for whom she had toiled was indeed lying at the bottom of the river, her purpose in life gone for ever? Who could be more lonely and friendless than she was to-night?

So she listened to his pleading, heard him while he urged her to consider how poor a thing that legal tie was which he entreated her to forego; how often, how lightly cancelled by the disgraceful revelations of the divorce court.

"Time was when marriage meant till death," he said, "but that is an exploded fashion. Marriage nowadays means the convenience of a settlement which will enable a man either to found a family or to cheat his creditors. Marriage means till husband and wife are tired of each other, and till the lady has grown callous enough to face the divorce court."

And then he reminded her how the most romantic passions, the loves that have become history are not those alliances upon which parish priest and family lawyer have smiled. He reminded her of Abelard and Heloise, of Henri's passion for Gabrielle, and Nelson's deathless love for Emma Hamilton. He urged that society itself had pardoned these fair offenders, for love's sweet sake.

Her intellect was too clear to be deceived by such shallow reasoning.

On the very brink of the abyss she recoiled. Loving him with all her heart, knowing that life without him meant a colourless and hopeless existence—a hand-to-hand struggle with adversity, knowing by too bitter experience that to be well born and poor means lifelong humiliation, she yet had the strength to resist his pleading.

"Your wife or nothing," she said. "I never meant to hear your voice again after that night. I prayed to God that we might never meet again. And now for my father's sake I humiliate myself so far as to ask your help. If you will bring him back to me I will thank and bless you—and will try to forget your degrading propositions."

"Degrading, Hester!" he cried reproachfully, trying to take her hand again, the hand that had lain softly in his a few moments ago.

"Yes, degrading! What could you say to any wretched lost woman in London worse than you have said to me? You talk to me of love—and you offer me shame for my portion."

"Hester, that is a woman's narrow way of looking at life. As if the priest and the ring made all the difference."

"If you cared for me you would make me your wife."

"I am not free to marry, Hester. I am bound by a tie which I cannot break yet awhile. The tie may be loosened in years to come, and then you shall be my wife. So soon as I am free we will have the priest and the ring, the whole ecclesiastical formula—although that formula will not make me one whit more your slave than I am this night."

"I don't want a slave," she said resolutely. "I want a husband whom I can love and honour. And now I am going back to the police station to ask if there is any news."

"Let me go with you."

"I had rather you went to Scotland Yard, as you promised."

"I will go to Scotland Yard. I will do anything to prove my love and loyalty."

"Loyalty! Oh, Mr. Hillersdon, do not play with words. I am an ignorant, inexperienced girl, but I know what truth and loyalty mean—and that you have violated both to me."

They left the house together, in opposite directions. Gerard walked towards Oakley Street, hailed the first cab he met, which took him to Scotland Yard, where he saw the officials, and gave a careful description of the missing Nicholas Davenport, age, personal characteristics, manners, and habits. When asked if the missing man had any money about him at the time of his disappearance, he professed ignorance, but added that it was possible that he had money. It was late in the evening when he left Scotland Yard, and he went into the Park, and roamed about for some time in a purposeless manner, his brain fevered, his nerves horribly shaken. This horror of Nicholas Davenport's fate absorbed his mind at one moment, and in the next he was thinking of Hester and his rejected love, troubled, irresolute, full of pity for the woman he loved, full of tenderest compassion for scruples which seemed to him futile and foolish in the world as he knew it, where illicit liaisons were open secrets, and where no man or woman refused praise and honour to sin in high places. He pitied the simplicity which clung to virtue for its own sake, a strange spectacle in that great guilty city, a penniless girl sacrificing love and gladness for the sake of honour.

He went from the Park to the Small Hours, a club where he knew he was likely to find Jermyn, who rarely went to bed before the summer dawn. "It is bad enough to be obliged to go to bed by candle-light from October to March," said Jermyn, who declared that any man who took more than three or four hours' sleep in the twenty-four shamefully wasted his existence.

"We are men, not dormice," he said, "and we are sent into this world to live—not to sleep."

Gerard found Jermyn the ruling spirit of a choice little supper-party, where the manners of the ladies—although they were not strictly "in society," and would not have been received at the Heptachord, or at the Sensorium—were irreproachable, so irreproachable, indeed, that the party would have been dull but for Justin Jermyn. His ringing laugh and easy vivacity raised the spirits of his convives, and made the champagne more exhilarating than the champagne of these latter days is wont to be.

"A capital wine, ain't it?" he asked gaily. "It's a new brand, 'Fin de Siècle,' the only wine I care for."

Gerard drank deep of the new wine, would have drunk it had it been vitriol, in the hope of drowning Nicholas Davenport's ghost; and when the little banquet was over, and youth and folly were waltzing to the strains of Strauss in an adjoining room, he linked his arm through Jermyn's and led him out of the club, and into the stillness of St. James's Park.

Here he told his mentor all that had happened, denounced himself as a traitor, and perhaps a murderer. "It was your scheme," he said; "you suggested the snare, and you have made me the wretch I am."

Jermyn's frank laughter had a sound of mockery as he greeted this accusation.

"That is always the way," he said, "a man asks for advice, and turns upon his counsellor. You wanted to get that officious old father out of the way. I suggested a manner of doing it. And now you call me Mephisto and yourself murderer."

And then with airiest banter he laughed away Gerard's lingering scruples, scoffed at man's honour and at woman's virtue, and Gerard, who had long ago abandoned all old creeds for a dreary agnosticism, heard and assented to that mocking sermon, whose text was self, and whose argument was self-indulgence.

"I shudder when I think of the myriads of fanatics who have sacrificed happiness here for the sake of an imaginary paradise—wretches who have starved body and soul upon earth to feast and rejoice in the New Jerusalem," said Jermyn, finally, as they parted at Buckingham Gate in the faint flush of dawn.

Less than half an hour afterwards Gerard was in the Rosamond Road, and at the little iron gate that opened into the scrap of garden, where a cluster of sunflowers rose superior to the dust, pale in the steel-blue light of dawn.

The lamp was still burning in the parlour, and he saw Hester's shadow upon the blind. She was sitting with her elbows on the table, her face buried in her hands, and he knew that she must be weeping or praying. She had let her lamp burn on, unconscious of the growing daylight. The window was open at the top, but the lower half was shut. He tapped on the pane, and the shadow of a woman's form rose up suddenly, and broadened over the blind.

"Hester, Hester," he called. He raised the sash, as she drew up the blind, and they stood face to face, both pale, breathless, and agitated.

"You have heard of him, you have seen him," she cried excitedly. "Is it good news?"

"Yes, Hester, yes," he answered, and sprang into the room.

CHAPTER XIX.

ALL ALONG THE RIVER.

Between Reading and Oxford there is a riverside village, of which the fashionable world has yet taken scant notice. It lies beyond the scene of the great river carnivals, and the houseboat is even yet a strange apparition beside those willowy shores. There is an old church with its square tower and picturesque graveyard placed at a bend of the river, where the stream broadens into a shallow bay. The church; a straggling row of old-world cottages, with overhanging thatch and low cob walls, half hidden under roses, honeysuckle, and Virginia creeper, cottages whose gardens are gorgeous with the vivid colouring of old-fashioned flowers; a general shop, which is also the post-office; and a rustic butcher's, with verandah and garden, constitute the village. The Rectory nestles close beside the church, and the Rectory garden brims over into the churchyard, long trails of banksia roses straggling across the low stone wall which divides the garden of the living from the garden of the dead. The churchyard is one of the prettiest in England, for the old Rector has cared for it and loved it during his five and thirty years' incumbency, and nowhere are the roses lovelier or the veronicas finer than in that quiet resting-place by the river.

The land round about belongs to a man of old family, who is rich enough to keep his estate unspoiled by the speculating builder, and who would as soon think of cutting off his right hand as of cutting up the meadows he scampered over on his sheltie, sixty years ago, into eligible building plots, or of breaking through the tangled hedges of hawthorn and honeysuckle to make new roads for the erection of semi-detached villas. In a word Lowcombe is still the country pure and simple, undefiled by the suburban early English or the shoddy Queen Anne schools of architecture.

On the brink of the Thames, and about twenty minutes' walk from Lowcombe Church, there is an old-fashioned cottage, humble as to size and elevation, but set in so exquisite a garden that the owner of a palace might envy its possessor a retreat so fair in its rustic seclusion.

Here, while the second crop of roses were in their fullest beauty, a young couple whose antecedents and belongings were unknown to the inhabitants of Lowcombe set up their modest menage of a man and two maids, a gardener, a dinghy, and a skiff.

The village folks troubled themselves very little about these young people, who paid their bills weekly; but the few gentilities in the parish of Lowcombe were much exercised in mind about a couple who brought no letters of introduction, and who might, or might not, be an acquisition to the neighbourhood. The fact that Mr. Hanley was alleged to have bought the house he lived in and forty acres of meadow land attached thereto, gave him a certain status in the parish, and made the question as to whether Mr. and Mrs. Hanley should or should not be called upon a far more serious problem than it would have been in the case of an annual tenant, or even a leaseholder.

"Nobody seems to have heard of these Hanleys," said Miss Malcolm, a Scottish spinster, who prided herself upon race and respectability, to Mrs. Donovan, an Irish widow, who was swollen with the importance that goes with income rather than with blue blood. "If the man was of good family surely some of us must have heard of him before now. Lady Isabel, who goes about immensely in the London season, thinks it very curious that she should never have met this Mr. Hanley in society."

"Old Banks was asking an extortionate price for the Rosary and the land about it," said Mrs. Donovan, "so the man must have money."

"Made in trade, I dare say," speculated Miss Malcolm, whereat the widow, whose husband had made his fortune as a manufacturer and exporter of Irish brogues, reddened angrily. It was painful to remember in the aristocratic *dolce far niente* of her declining years that the name of Donovan was stamped upon millions of boots in the old world and the new, and that the famous name was still being stamped by the present proprietor.

Finally, after a good deal of argument, it was decided at a tea-party which included the *élite* of the parish, with the exception of the Rector, that until Mr. Muschatt, of Muschatt's Court, had called upon the new people at the Rosary no one else should call. Whatever was good in the eyes of Muschatt, whose pedigree could be traced without a break from the reign of Edward the Confessor, must be good for the rest of the parish.

And while the village Agora debated their social fate, what of this young couple? Were they languishing for the coming of afternoon callers, pining for the sight of strange faces and unfamiliar names upon a cluster of visiting cards? Were they nervously awaiting the village verdict as to whether they were or were not to be visited? Not they! Perhaps they hardly knew that there was any world outside that garden by the river, and that undulating stretch of pasture where the fine old timber gave to meadow land almost the dignity of a park. Here they could wander for hours meeting no one, hearing no voices but their own, isolated by the intensity of an affection that took no heed of yesterday or to-morrow.

"I never knew what happiness meant till I loved you, Hester," said the young man whom Lowcombe talked of as "This Mr. Hanley."

"And I am happy because you are happy," Hester answered softly. "And you will not talk any more about having only a year or two to live, will you, Gerard? That was all nonsense—only said to frighten me—wasn't it?"

He could not tell her that it was sober, serious truth, and that he had in no wise darkened the doctor's dark verdict. Those imploring eyes urged him to utter words of hope and comfort.

"I believe doctors are often mistaken in a case, because they underrate the influence of the mind upon the body," he said. "I was so miserable when I went to Dr. South that I can hardly wonder he thought me marked for death."

"And you are happy, now, Gerard—really, really happy; not for a day only?" she asked pleadingly.

"Not for a day, but for ever, so long as I have you, sweet wife."

He called her by that sacred name often in their talk, not being sensitive enough to divine that at every repetition of the name to which she had no right, her heart thrilled with a strange sudden pain. She troubled him with no lamentings over the sacrifice he had exacted from her. She had never reproached him with the treachery that had made her his. Generous, devoted, and self-forgetful, she gave him her heart as she would have given him her life, and her tears and her remorse were scrupulously hidden from him. To make him happy was now the sole desire and purpose of her life. Of her father's fate she was still uncertain, but she was not without hope that he lived. A detective had traced a man, whose description tallied with that of Nicholas Davenport, to Liverpool, where he had embarked on a steamer bound for Melbourne within two days of Davenport's disappearance from Chelsea. The passage had been taken in the name of Danvers, and the passenger had described himself as a clergyman of the Church of England. Hester was the more inclined to believe that the man so described might be her father as he had often talked of going back to Australia and trying his luck again in that wider world. It was not because he had failed once that he must needs fail again, he had told her.

"But how could he have got the money for his passage?" asked Hester. "He had exhausted all his old friends. It seems impossible that he could have had money enough to pay for the voyage to Melbourne."

And then on his knees at her feet in the silence of the night, with tears and kisses and protestations of remorse, Gerard Hillersdon confessed his sin.

"It was base beyond all common baseness," he said. "You can never think worse of me for that act than I think of myself. But your father stood between us. I would have committed murder to win you!"

"It might have been murder," she said dejectedly.

"I have told you my crime, and you hate me for it. I was a fool to tell you."

"Hate you! No, Gerard, no; I can never hate you. I should go on loving you if you were the greatest sinner upon this earth. Do you think I should be here if I could help loving you?"

His head sank forward upon her knees, and he sobbed out his passion of remorse and self-abasement, and received absolution. He tried to persuade her that all would be well, that her father's health might be benefited by a long sea voyage, and that he might not fall back into the old evil ways. He might not! That was the utmost that could be said; a faint hope at best. Yet this faint hope comforted her; and in that summer dream of happiness, in the long days on the river, the long *tête-à-tête* with a companion who was never weary of pouring out his thoughts, his feelings, his unbeliefs to that never-wearying listener, all sense of trouble vanished out of her mind. She only knew that she was beloved, and that to be thus beloved was to be happy. Her burden of tears would have to be borne, perhaps, some day far away in the dim future, when he should weary of her and she should see his love waning. There must be a penalty for such a sin as hers; but the time of penance was still afar off, and she might die before the fatal hour of disillusion. She thrust aside all thought of dark days to come, and devoted herself to the duty of the present—the duty of making her lover happy. All his sins against her were forgiven; and she was his without one thought of self.

They had begun their new life almost as casually as the babes in the wood, and after wandering about for a few days in the lovely Thames Valley, stopping at quiet out-of-the-way villages, they had come to Lowcombe, the least sophisticated of all the spots they had seen. Here they found the Rosary, a thatched cottage set in a delicious garden, with lawn and shrubberies sloping to the river. Successive tenants had added to the original building, and there were two or three fairly good rooms under the steep gabled roof, one a drawing-room open to the rafters, and with three windows opening into a thatched verandah. The Rosary had long been for sale, not because people had not admired it, but because the owner, an Oxford tradesman, had asked an extravagant price for his property.

Gerard gave him his price without question, having seen that Hester was enamoured of the riverside garden, and in three days the cottage was furnished, paint cleaned, walls repapered, and everything swept and garnished, and Hester installed as mistress of the house, with a man and two maids, engaged at Reading.

The furniture was of the simplest, such furniture as a young clergyman might have chosen for his first vicarage. Hester had entreated that there might be nothing costly in her surroundings, no splendour or luxury which should remind her of her lover's wealth.

"I want to forget that you are a rich man," she said. "If you made the house splendid I should feel as if you had bought me."

Seeing her painfully earnest upon this point, Gerard obeyed her to the letter. Except for the elegance of art muslins and Indian draperies, and for the profusion of choice flowers in rooms and landings and staircase, except for the valuable books scattered on the tables and piled in the window-seats, the cottage might have been the home of modest competence rather than of boundless wealth.

Hester's touch lent an additional grace even to things that were in themselves beautiful. She had the home genius which is one of the choicest of feminine gifts—the genius which pervades every circumstance of home life, from the adornment of a drawing-room to the arrangement of a dinner-table. Before he had lived at Lowcombe for a week Gerard had come to see Hester's touch upon everything. He had never before seen flowers so boldly and picturesquely grouped; nor in all the country houses he had visited and admired had he ever seen anything so pretty as the cottage vestibule, the deep embrasure of the long latticed window filled with roses, and in each angle of the room a tall glass vase of lilies reaching up towards the low timbered ceiling. No hand but Hester's was allowed to touch the books which he had brought to this retreat—a costly selection from his library at Hillersdon House. He had seen to the packing of the two large cases that conveyed these books, and he had so arranged their conveyance that none of his servants should know where they went after the railway van had carried them away. No one was to know of this retreat by the river—not even Justin Jermyn, his confidant and *alter ego*. He wanted this new life of his—this union of two souls that were as one—to remain for ever a thing apart from his everyday existence; he wanted this home to be a secret haven, where he might creep to die when his hour should come; and it seemed to him that even the inevitable end would lose its worst terrors here, in Hester's arms, with her sweet voice to soothe the laborious passage to the unknown land.

And if death would be less awful here than elsewhere, how sweet was life in this rural hermitage! How blissful the long summer days upon the river, with this gentle, pensive girl, who seemed so utterly in sympathy with him; who, after one week of union thought as he thought, believed as he believed; had surrendered life, mind, heart, and being to the man she loved, merging her intellectual identity into his, until nothing was left of the creed learnt in childhood and faithfully followed through girlhood, except a tender memory of something which had been dear and sacred, and which for her had ceased to be.

For her Christ was no longer the Saviour and Redeemer she had worshipped. He was only the "Man of Nazareth"—a beautiful and admirable character, standing out from the tumultuous background of the world's history, radiant with the calm, clear light of perfect goodness, the gifted originator of life's simplest and purest ethics, a teacher whose wise counsels had been darkened and warped by long centuries of superstition, and who was only now emerging from the spectre-haunted midnight of ignorance into the clear light of reason.

Gerard belonged to the school of sentimental agnostics. He was willing to speak well of Christ and of His prophets, was full of admiration for the grand personality of Elijah, and thought the Book of Job the loftiest expression of human imaginings. He loved to dwell upon the picturesque in the Bible, and Hester learnt from his conversation how familiar an infidel may be with Holy Writ. When she told him how great a consolation the Christian's unquestioning belief had been to her in the darkest days of her poverty, he smiled at her sweet simplicity, and said how he too had been a believer till he began to think. And so, with many tears, as if she had been parting with some cherished human friend, she let the Divine Image of the Man-God go, and accepted the idea of the God-like Man, a being to be named in the same breath with Socrates and Plato, with Shakespeare and Milton—only a little higher than the highest modern intellect. Only a week, and a creed was destroyed, but in that week what a flood of talk about all things in heaven and on earth, what theories, and dreams, and philosophies sounded and explored! To this woman, whom he loved more fondly than he had ever dreamed of loving, Gerard gave the intellectual experience of his manhood, from the hour he began to ponder upon the problem of man's existence to his latest opinion upon the last book he had read. Had she not loved him, her own simple faith, the outcome of feeling unsustained by thought, might have been strong enough to stand fast against his arguments; but love took the part of the assailant, and the result was a foregone conclusion. Had he been a religious enthusiast, a fervid Papist, believing in saintly relics and miracle-working statues, she would have believed as he taught her to believe. Her faith, fortified by her love, would have removed mountains. With her, to love meant total self-abnegation. Even the sharp stings of remorse were deadened by the happiness of knowing that her lover was happy; and as she gradually grew to accept his idea of a universe governed only by the laws of human reason, she came to think that whether Church and State had assisted at her marriage was indeed, as Gerard urged, of infinitesimal significance. And this intellectual emancipation achieved, there remained but one cloud on her horizon. Her only fear or anxiety was for her father's welfare—and even of him she tried to think as little as possible, knowing that she could do nothing for him except await the result of his misconduct. She had given him all the fairest years of her girlhood, and he had accepted her sacrifice, and at the first opportunity had chosen his darling vice in preference to his daughter. She had a new master now, a master at whose feet she laid all the treasures of her life, for whom no sacrifice could ever be too much.

Time is measured by feeling. There are days in every life which mean epochs. One eventful week may stand for more in the sum of existence than half a dozen placid monotonous years. It seemed to Hester, while September was yet young, that her union with Gerard Hillersdon had lasted for half a lifetime. She could scarcely think of herself except as his wife. All the past years seemed dark and shadowy, like a dioramic picture that melts gradually into something strange and new. The name of wife no longer wounded her ear. The new philosophy taught her that she was no less a wife because she had no legal claim to the title. The new philosophy taught her that she had a right to do what she liked with her life, so long as she did not wrong her neighbour. One clause in that Church Catechism her childish lips had repeated so often, was blotted out for ever. Duty to God was done with, since there was no God. All moral obligations were comprised in duty to man—a reasonable regard for the happiness of the largest number.

That renunciation of the creed of hope was not accomplished without moments of mental agony, even in the midst of that dream of love which filled the world with one adored presence. There were moments when the young heart would have gone up to the old Heaven in prayer—prayer for the endurance of this deep felicity, prayer for the creature she loved too well. But the new Heaven was a blank—an infinite system of worlds and distances, measureless, illimitable—but there was no one there—no one—no mind, no heart, no love, no pity; only systems and movement, perpetual movement, which included light, heat, evolution, everything—a mighty and complex universe of which her lover and herself were but unconsidered atoms, of whom no higher Existence had ever taken heed, since they two, poor sport of Life and Time, were the crowning glory of evolution. The progress of the species might achieve something loftier in infinite ages to come; but so far they two, Gerard and herself, were the highest outcome of immeasurable ages. For conduct, for happiness, for protection from the dangers that surrounded them, they had to look to themselves and to none other.

Had she been less absorbed by her affection for the creature Hester would have more acutely suffered by this darkening over of the world beyond, which had once been her consolation and her hope; but in Gerard's companionship there was no need of a better world.

Those last weeks of summer were exceptionally beautiful. It seemed as if summer were lingering in the land even when September was drawing to its close. Trees and shrubberies, the flower-beds that made great masses of vivid colour on the lawn—scarlet, orange, golden yellow, deepest azure—were untouched by frost, unbeaten by rain. The broad, old-fashioned border which gave an old-world air to one end of the garden was glorious with tall gaudy flowers—tritoma, Japanese anemones, cactus dahlias, late-blooming lilies, and roses red and white. And beyond the garden and encircling shrubbery, in the hedgerows and meadows, in the copses and on the patches of hillocky common, heather, gorse, wild-flowers, there was everywhere the same rich luxuriance, the wealth of colour and perfume, that joyous exuberance of Nature which five or six weeks of old-fashioned summer weather can fling over the face of an English landscape.

It may be that this abundant beauty, this delicious interlude of sunshine and blue sky helped Hester Davenport to forget the shadows in her life—to forget all that was painful and dubious in her position, and to exist only in the happiness of the present. Morning after morning the same sunlit river rippled round the boat, which seemed to dance and twinkle in the vivid light, as if it were a living thing, longing to be free and afloat. Morning after morning Gerard and Hester sculled their skiff along the windings of romantic backwaters, halting under a roof of greenery to idle away the sultry hours in talk or reading. Under those slanting willows, whose green tresses dipped and trailed in the bright blue water, they would sit for a long summer day, Hester's dexterous fingers employed upon some piece of artistic embroidery, while Gerard read aloud to her.

In this way they went through all the devious windings and eloquent incomprehensibilities of the "Revolt of Islam"—in this way Hester heard for the first time of the "Ring and the Book"—and wept and suffered with the gentle heroine, and thrilled and trembled in those scenes of dramatic grandeur and fiery passion, unsurpassed in the literature of power. A new world opened before her as Gerard familiarised her with his favourite authors—the lawlessness of Shelley, the rude vehemence of the Elizabethan dramatists, the florid eloquence of Jeremy Taylor, the capricious brilliancy of De Quincey, the subtle wit of Lawrence Sterne. These and many other writers, long familiar to the man who had lived by literature, were all new to Hester.

"What an ignoramus I have been!" she exclaimed; "I thought when I had read Shakespeare and Milton, and Byron and Tennyson I knew all the best treasures of English literature—but now the treasures seem inexhaustible."

There were other literatures too to be tasted. They read Eugénie Grandet together, and Hester wept over the heroine's disappointed life. They read new books and old books, having nothing to do in those six weeks of perpetual summer but read and talk and ramble, and worship one another, each unto the other the beginning and end of life.

"If it could last!" thought Gerard; but Hester, less experienced, and, therefore, more confiding in Fate, dreamt that this Elysium would last till the grim spectre, who tramples down all blisses, broke into their enchanted palace.

She watched his face with fondest anxiety, and it was her delight to mark how the dark lines and the pinched, wan look seemed to be vanishing day by day. Who knows whether it was really so, or whether in the face she worshipped she saw only what she so ardently longed to see, signs of improving health and youth renewed. His eyes had a new brightness, she thought, and if he looked pale in the daylight, she had always a bright colour in the evening as they sat side by side in the luminous circle of the reading-lamp. And again and again he assured her that happiness had given him a new lease of life, that all the old aches and wearinesses had been subjugated, and that Dr. South would tell a very different story next time he overhauled his patient.

"He told me to seek happiness, and I have sought and found it," he said, kissing the slender hands that had toiled so patiently in the past, and which now so often lay idly in his.

Gerard thought of the Chart of Life behind the curtain at Hillersdon House, and fancied that when he should again trace a line upon that mystical chart the outline would be bold and free, the stroke of the pen broad and steady.

In those six weeks of happiness he had severed himself almost entirely from his past life, and from that wrestling, striving world in which a bachelor under thirty, with two millions of money, is an important factor. The men of his set had left off wondering why he started neither racing stud nor mammoth yacht, why neither the blue ribbon of the turf nor the glories of the Royal Yacht Squadron had any attraction for him. The masculine portion of society had set him down finally as a poor creature, without manly aspirations or English pluck—an æsthete, a dilettante, a man good for nothing but to keep a free luncheon table, and to lose a hundred now and again at écarté or piquet. Women were far more indulgent. They talked of Gerard Hillersdon as "quite too interesting—so delightfully unlike any one else."

He had arranged that all his letters should be re-addressed to the Post Office at Reading, and twice a week he despatched the indispensable replies from Reading to the house-steward, to be posted in London. Thus even his own servants knew of no nearer address than Reading, which was seven miles from the Rosary. He answered only such letters as absolutely required replies, and to these his answers were brief and colourless. He had so concentrated all his thoughts upon Hester, and the placid, sunlit life which they were leading, that it was only by a painful effort he could bring his mind to bear upon the commonplace of friendship or the dry-as-dust of business. Certain letters there were which had to be written somehow, the writing of which was absolute mental agony. These were his weekly letters to the woman whom he was pledged to marry when the year of her widowhood should have ended. And of that year a quarter had already gone by—a quarter of a year which had drifted him so far away from his old love that he looked back at the dim past wonderingly, and asked himself, "Did I ever love her? Was not the whole story a concession to society ethics, which demand that every young man should have his goddess, *de* *par le monde*, every married woman her youthful adorer, every smart *ménage* its open secret, not to know which is not to belong to the smart world?"

Once a week at least he must write to the absent lady; for to neglect her might result in a catastrophe. Her nature, he told himself, was of the catastrophic order, a woman most dangerous to offend. He had never forgotten that moment in Hertford Street when, at the thought of his inconstancy, she had risen up in her fury, white to the lips, save where the hectic of anger burned upon her cheek in one red spot, like a flame. He might doubt—did doubt—if he had ever loved her; but he could not doubt that she loved him, with that love of woman which is "a fearful and a lovely thing."

No; he must maintain the falsehood of his position till he could find some way of issue from this net which he had made for himself in the morning of life. Now, with love at its zenith, he could conceive no phase of circumstances that could make him false to Hester. Her life must be intertwined with his to the end; albeit he might never parade his passion before the cold, cruel eyes of the world—eyes that stare down the poetry of life, and if a man married Undine would look at her with cold calculation through a tortoiseshell merveilleuse, and ask, "What are her people?"

Once a week the lying letter had to be written—lying, for he dared not write too coldly lest the distant divinity should mark the change of temperature and come flying homeward to find out the reason for this falling-off. So he secluded himself in his study one morning in every week, telling Hester that he had troublesome business letters which must be answered, and he composed his laborious epistle, spicing his forced tenderness with flippancy that was meant for wit, elaborating society scandals from the faintest hints in *Truth* or the *World*, rhapsodising on summer time and the poets, and filling his tale of pages somehow.

His conscience smote him when Edith Champion praised these artificial compositions, this Abelard done to order. Her perception of epistolary style was not keen enough to detect the falsehood of the writer.

"What lovely letters you have written me lately!" she wrote, "only too far apart. I never knew you write so eloquently, for you must remember how you used to put me off with a couple of hurried pages. I am touched to the heart at the thought that absence seems only to bring us nearer together, more perfectly in sympathy with each other. I spent half the night—indeed the mountains were rosy in the sunlight when I closed my book—reading Shelley, after your last letter, in which you told me how you had been reading him lately. You are right. We are too apt to neglect him. Browning is so absorbing with his analytical power—his gift of turning men and women inside-out and dissecting every mental phase—he so thoroughly suits the temper of the age we live in, which seems to me an age of asking questions for which there are no answers. Write oftener, dearest. Your delightful letters have but one fault—there are too few of them."

"So much for the divining rod of a woman's intelligence," thought Gerard, as he tore up the letter.

And then from the highly-cultivated lady, who was well abreast of the stream of modern literature, and who was full of the current ideas of the age, he turned to the fond girl whose delight was to listen to the expression of his ideas, who accepted his gospel as if there were no other teacher on this earth, as if all the wisdom of Buddha, Confucius, and Socrates were concentrated in this young journalist of nine-and-twenty. He turned to Hester, and found in her companionship a sweet reposeful influence he had never felt in the old days when all his leisure hours were spent with Edith Champion.

In one of Edith's later letters there was a remonstrance.

"You tell me nothing of yourself," she said. "Not even where you are or what you are doing. Your paper and the Knightsbridge post-mark indicate that you are at Hillersdon House, but what are you doing there, and what can be keeping you in London when all the civilised world is scattered over moor and mountain, or roving on the sea? I sometimes fear you are ill—perhaps too ill to travel. If I really thought that I should waive every other consideration and go to London to be near you. And yet your delightful letters could hardly be written by a sick man. There is no languor or depression in them. A whim, I suppose, this lingering in town when everybody else has fled. You were always a creature of whims, and now you have millions you are naturally all the more whimsical. Not to be like other people! was not that your ambition years ago when we used to discuss your career?"

How could he read such letters as these without a pang of remorse? He suffered many such pangs as he read; but in the next half-hour he was floating idly with the current along the lovely river, and Hester's pale young loveliness was opposite him, the sweet face dimly seen in the deep shadow of a broad straw hat. Nothing that art can lend to beauty was needed to accentuate that delicate harmony of form and colouring. The simple cambric frock, the plain straw hat became her better than court robes and plumes and jewels could have done. She was just at the age when beauty needs the least adornment.

"I don't wonder that you refused to be tempted by all my offers of finery from man-mantua-makers," Gerard said to her one day. "You are lovelier in your cotton gowns than the handsomest woman in London in a hundred guinea confection by Raudnitz or Felix. But some day when we are in Paris I shall insist on dressing you up in their fine feathers, just to see how my gentle Hester will look as the Queen of Sheba. A woman of fashion, drest in the latest modish eccentricity, always recalls her Sheban majesty to my mind."

"Some day when we are in Paris!"

He often spoke as if their lives were to be spent together, as if wherever he went she would go with him. Sometimes in the midst of her happiness Hester lost herself in a labyrinth of mingled hope and fear. He had told her of an insurmountable obstacle to their legal union, and yet he spoke as if there were to be no end to this blessed life in which they lived only for each other. Ah, that was the shadow on the dial, that was the one stupendous fear. To this marriage of true minds, marriage unsanctified by church or law, there would come the end—the falling off of love, sudden or gradual; the bitter hopeless day on which she should awaken from her dream, and pass out of Paradise into the bleak barren world. She tried to steep heart and mind in the bliss of the present, to shut her eyes against all possibilities of woe. Whatever the future might bring it would be something to remember she had once been completely happy. Even a single day of such perfect bliss would shine like a star in the night of years to come. She would not spoil the ineffable present by forebodings about the future. And thus it was that Gerard Hillersdon had to listen to no repinings, to kiss away no remorseful tears. She who had given him her heart and life had given with all a woman's self-forgetfulness. What matter how fate might use her by-and-by? The triumph of her life was in her lover's happiness.

It would be difficult to imagine a life more secluded, more shut in and isolated from the outer world, or a spot more remote from the drawbacks of civilisation; and yet this young couple, wandering in the lanes and over the commons, or gliding along sunlit waters in their picturesque skiff, with its striped red and white sail, and its gaily-coloured Oriental cushions, were the cynosure of several pairs of eyes, which took heed of the smallest details in their behaviour or their surroundings, and the subject of several very active tongues, a subject which gave new zest to many a five-o'clock tea within driving distance of Lowcombe.

Placid and inoffensive as their lives were, the young people who were known as Mr. and Mrs. Hanley had given umbrage to the whole neighbourhood by various omissions and commissions within the six weeks of their residence at the Rosary.

In the first place they had taken no trouble to conciliate the residents among whom they had descended suddenly, or, in the words of the jovial and facetious curate of an adjoining parish, "as if they had been dropped out of a balloon." They had brought no letters of introduction. They had not explained themselves. They had planted themselves in the very midst of a select and immaculate little community without producing any evidence of their respectability.

"And yet no doubt they expect people to call upon them," said Lady Isabel Glendower, the help-meet of an ancient Indian General who went to garden-parties in a bath chair, and whose wife and daughters had taken upon themselves a tone of authority in all social matters, based upon the lady's rank as an earl's daughter. "Mr. Muschatt actually was going to call. I met him last week riding that wretched old cob towards the Rosary, and was just in time to stop him. 'Surely you are not going to compromise us by calling on these people,' I said, 'until we know more about them.'"

"The foolish old thing saw the young woman on the river the other day, and was so taken by her pretty face that he wanted to know more of her," said Clara Glendower, who was young and skittish. "He raved to me about her transparent complexion and simple cotton frock. Old men are so silly."

"I think, Lady Isabel, the less we say about these young people, the better," said Miss Malcolm, with awful significance. "They are evidently not the kind of persons you would like your daughters to know. A young man, able to spend money as freely as this young man does, cannot be without a circle of friends; and yet I can answer for it that not a creature except the tradesmen's youths has been to the Rosary for the last six weeks."

"But if they are honeymooning they may wish to be alone," suggested Cara.

"Honeymooning! nonsense, child," retorted Lady Isabel, who prided herself on being outspoken. "I dare say that young woman, in spite of her simple cotton frock, has had as many honeymoons as there are signs in the Zodiac. The most notorious women in London are the women who wear cotton frocks and don't paint their faces."

"Mr. and Mrs. Hanley have been six weeks at Lowcombe, and have never been to church. That stamps them," said Mrs. Donovan, at whose luxurious tea-table the conversation took place.

The Rector heard the fag end of the debate.

"I must see if I can persuade them to come to church," he said, in his mild, kindly voice. "It is rather too much of a jump at conclusions to suppose that because they are not church-goers they are disreputable. Half the young men of the present generation are Agnostics and Darwinians, and a good many young women imitate the young men's agnosticism just as eagerly as they imitate their collars and ties. I am old enough to know that one must make prodigious allowances for the erratic intellect of youth. Whether Muschatt calls on the Hanleys or not, I shall call and find out what manner of people they are. I am sorry I have put it off so long."

The Rector had a way of coming down with the heavy foot of benevolence upon the serpent's head of village malignity, now and again, on which account he was generally spoken of as an eccentric, and a man who would have been better placed anywhere than in the Church of England; an elderly widower, living with a soft-hearted maiden sister, childless, irresponsible, altogether lax in his ideas of morality, a man who took pity upon fallen village girls, and gave himself infinite trouble to save them from further evil, and to help them to live down their disgrace; a man who had laboured valiantly in the work of female emigration, and to whom almost every mail from the new world brought ill-spelt letters of gratitude and loving remembrance. Such a man the *élite* of Lowcombe considered should have cast in his lot at the East End of London. In a small settlement of eminently correct people he was out of place. He was too good for the neighbourhood; and the neighbourhood was too good for him.

CHAPTER XX.

"SOME DIM DERISION OF MYSTERIOUS LAUGHTER."

WHILE Mr. Gilstone, the Rector of Lowcombe, whose worst vice was procrastination, was meditating a ceremonious call upon his new parishioners, accident anticipated his design, and brought him face to face with the young woman whose morals and cotton frocks had met with such drastic treatment at Mrs. Donovan's Thursday tea-drinking.

Sauntering in the Rectory garden on Saturday afternoon Mr. Gilstone's keen glance was attracted by a figure seated near an old, old tombstone in a corner of the churchyard where his garden wall, in all its wealth of foliage, made an angle with the willowy bank of the river. The sunlight on the white cambric frock gave that seated form and bent brown head an air of something supernal, as it were Dante's divine lady in the light of Paradise. The Rector stepped upon a little knoll that was level with the top of the wall in order to look down upon the lady sitting by the tomb.

Yes, it was Mrs. Hanley—that Mrs. Hanley of whose antecedents and present way of life Lowcombe spoke shudderingly. He could just distinguish the exquisite profile under the shady straw hat, he could see the delicate ear, transparent in the sunlight, the perfect curve of the throat rising from a loosely tied lace handkerchief, the graceful lines of the slender girlish figure in the plain white gown. No art had been used to enhance that perfect beauty, and none was needed. The purity of the white gown, the simplicity of the Tuscan hat, were in harmony with that placid and ideal loveliness.

"Poor child, I hope with all my heart that all is well with her," mused the Rector, as he stepped down from the grassy knoll, and strolled to the gate opening into the churchyard, and then with quiet step made his way to the tomb against which Hester was sitting, on a grassy ridge, over which periwinkle and St. John's wort had been allowed to run riot, half covering the crumbling grey stones and clothing the cumbrous early Georgian sepulchre with fresh young beauty. This was a corner of God's Acre in which the Rector permitted a careless profusion of foliage, a certain artistic neglect that was part of his plan.

The lady was reading, and on looking down at her book, Mr. Gilstone saw that she was reading Shelley's "Alastor."

She looked up at the sound of his footfall among the leaves, and then calmly resumed her reading. He drew nearer, hat in had.

"Allow me to introduce myself to you, Mrs. Hanley," he said, in his pleasant voice. "I have been meaning to call upon you and Mr. Hanley for a long time, but indolence and procrastination are the vices of old men. Seeing you just now from my garden I thought I might snatch the opportunity of making friends with you here on my own ground."

She had risen in confusion, blushing violently, with a scalding rush of crimson over brow and cheeks, and her heart beating with almost suffocating force. A criminal upon whose shoulder the law had just laid its iron hand could hardly have suffered more. In that one moment Hester Davenport realised what it was to be a social pariah. It was as if she had awakened suddenly from a dream of bliss to find herself alone in the cold workaday world, face to face with a judge who had power to denounce and punish.

"Pray, sit down," said the old man, "and let us have a little chat."

He seated himself on the low boundary wall—lowest just at this part of the churchyard, where the fairy spleen-wort grew in every chink of the crumbling stones.

"You have been my neighbours for some time," said the Rector, "and yet I have seen so little of you. I am sorry you don't come to my church—but perhaps you are people who object to our simple village services, and you go further afield."

"We do not go to any church," Hester faltered. "It would be only hypocrisy if we were to join in services which have very little meaning for us. We honour and love the Gospel for all that is true and beautiful in it, but we cannot believe as you and your congregation believe, and so it is better to stop away from church."

"You are very young to have joined the great army of unbelievers," said the Rector, with no change in the gentleness of his tone, or the friendly light of his eyes. He had heard too many young people prattle of their agnosticism to be particularly shocked or startled at the words of unbelief from these girlish lips. "Were you brought up in a household of infidels—were your early teachers unbelievers?"

"Oh no. I was once a Christian," she answered, with a stifled sob. "I once believed without questioning—believed in the divinity of Christ, believed that He could heal the sick and raise the dead, believed that He was near me at all hours of my life, nearest when I was in deepest sorrow."

"And when did you cease to believe in His presence—when did you lose the assurance of a Saviour who could pity your sorrows and understand your temptations?"

"Doubt came gradually, with thought, and thinking over the thoughts of others far wiser than myself."

"Mr. Hanley, your husband, is an agnostic, I take it?"

The drooping head bent a little lower; the hand on the open book turned a leaf or two with a restless movement.

"He does not believe in miracles," she answered reluctantly.

"Nor in a life to come—nor in an Almighty God to whom we are all accountable for our actions. I know the creed of the youthful Freethinker—universal liberty; liberty to follow the bent of his own desires and his own passions wherever they may lead him; and for the rest the Gospel of Humanity, which means tall talk about the grandeur and wisdom of man in the abstract, combined with a comfortable indifference to the wants and sorrows of man in the concrete, man at Bethnal Green or Haggerstone. Oh, I know what young men are," exclaimed the Rector, with indignant scorn; "how shallow, how arrogant, how ready to absorb the floating opinions of their day, and to take ready-made ideas for the results of original thought. Frankly, now, Mrs. Hanley, is it only since your marriage that you have been an infidel?"

Hester faltered a reluctant "Yes."

And then, after a brief pause, she began to plead for the man she idolised.

"Indeed, he is not shallow or ignorant," she said. "He has thought long and deeply upon the religions of the world, has brooded over those instincts which lead the hopes and desires of all of us to a life beyond—an unseen universe. He is not a strong man—he may never live to be old—indeed I sometimes fear he will not, and we have both talked often and long about that other world which we once believed in. We should be so much happier if we could believe—if we could hope that when death parts us it will not be for ever. But how can we hope for the impossible—how can we shut our eyes to the revelations of science—the fixed, immutable laws which hem us in on every side, and show us of what we are made and what must be our end?"

"Dust we are, and to dust we must return," said the Rector, "but do you think there is nothing outside the dust—nothing that will survive and ripen to more perfect life when this poor clay is under the sod. Do you think that the innate belief of all human kind carries no moral weight against the narrow laws of existence under the conditions and restrictions in which we know it; conditions and restrictions which may be changed in a moment by the fiat of Omnipotence, as the earth is changed by an earthquake or the ocean by a storm? Who, looking at the placid, smiling sea could conceive the fury and the force of a tempest if he had never seen one? You would find it as difficult to believe in that level water lifted mountains high, or in the racing surf, as to believe in the survival of intellect and identity, the passage from a known life here to an unknown life hereafter. The philosophers of these latter days call the unknown the unknowable, or the unthinkable, and suppose they have settled and made an end of everything which they cannot understand. But I am not going to preach sermons out of church, Mrs. Hanley. I am much more interested in you than in your opinions. At your age opinions change, and change again—but the personality remains pretty much the same. Even if you and your husband don't come to church you are my parishioners, and I want to know more of you. I hope you both like Lowcombe?"

"Oh, it is far more than liking. We both love the place."

"And you mean to live among us? You will not grow tired of the river, even when winter sheds a gentle greyness over all that is now so brilliant? There are people who say they are fond of the country—in summer. Take my word for it, the souls of those people are never far from Oxford Street. To love the country one must know and admire every phase and every subtle change of every season. Awakening from a long sleep one should be able to say at the first glance across the woods and hills—'this is mid-October or this is March.' One should know the season almost to a week. You are not one of those who only care for a midsummer landscape, I hope?"

"No, indeed! I love the country always—and I hate London."

The shudder with which the last words were spoken gave earnestness to the avowal.

"You have not been happy in London," said the Rector, his quick ear catching a deeper meaning than the words expressed.

"I have been very unhappy there."

"And here you are quite happy. As a girl you had troubles; your surroundings were not all you could wish; but your wedded life is perfectly happy, is it not?"

"Utterly happy."

"Come to church, then, my dear Mrs. Hanley. Come and kneel in our village church—the old, old church, where so many have knelt, and given thanks in joy, and been comforted in affliction. Come and give thanks to God for your happiness. It is not for you, who scarcely know what mathematics mean, to refuse to believe in a God because His existence cannot be mathematically demonstrated. Your own heart must tell you that you have need of God, that you have need of a conscience outside your own conscience, a wisdom above your own wisdom. Come and kneel among us, and give God thanks that your lines have been set in pleasant places—and, since I am told you are rich, come and work among our poor. It is good for the young and prosperous to interest themselves in the old and needy. If you go among our cottagers at first as a duty, and perhaps thinking it an unpleasant duty, you will soon come to love the work for its own sake. There is sweetness in your face that tells me your heart will open to the unhappy."

"I love visiting the poor," Hester answered, brightening a little at this suggestion. "I have been poor, and know what poverty means. I should like to go about among your cottagers—if—if my husband"—she faltered at the word, in spite of all those broader ideas which Gerard had taught her—"if my husband will let me."

"He could hardly refuse you the happiness of making others a little happier—you who possess all the material elements of happiness in superabundance. I feel assured Mr. Hanley will consent to your devoting a few of your leisure hours to my cottagers. I will only send you to wholesome cottages, and really deserving people. But, as they are all good churchmen, I want you to come to church first. They are sure to talk to you about the church services, and you will be embarrassed, and they will be shocked if you have to say that you never go to church. I can't tell you what that means to simple people, for whom church is the ante-chamber of heaven. To them it is anathema maranatha, the abomination of desolation."

"I cannot go to church," said Hester, with averted face.

"Not even to thank God for your happy life, for your marriage with the man you love?"

"No, no, no!"

"Then my dear young lady, you lead me to think that this seemingly happy union is one for which you dare not thank God; or in plain speech that you are not Mr. Hanley's wife."

Her sobs were her only answer. All those grand theories of universal liberty, of virtue that knew not law, which she had taken to her heart of late, all she had learned at second-hand from Gerard, and at first-hand from Shelley, vanished out of her mind, and she sat by the Rector's side crushed by the weight of her sin, as deeply convinced of her own shame and worthlessness as she who knelt amidst the accusing Pharisees and waited for the punishment of the old law, unexpectant of the new law of pardon.

"I am sorry for you, my dear young lady, deeply and truly sorry. You were not born for a life of degradation."

"There is no degradation," protested Hester, through her tears; "my love for him and his for me is too complete and true ever to mean degradation. He has read much and thought much, and has got beyond old codes and worn-out institutions. I am as much and as truly his wife as if we had been married in your church yonder."

"But you are not his lawful wife, and other wives, down to the humblest peasant woman in this village, will think badly of you, and all Christian women will think you a sinner—a sinner to be pitied and loved perhaps, but a sinner all the same. Why should that be? There is no other tie, I hope? Mr. Hanley is not a married man?"

"Oh no, no!"

"Thank God! Then he must marry you. It will be my duty to put the matter before him in the right light."

"Oh, pray do not interfere," exclaimed Hester. "He would think I had come to you to complain—he would love me less, perhaps—would think me designing, selfish, caring only for myself. There is nothing in life I care for but his happiness, and he is perfectly happy now. He knows that I am devoted to him, that I would give my life for him——"

"You have given your honour—that to such a woman as you is sometimes more than life."

"Honour or life, I could not count the cost of either for his sake."

"And he must be a villain if he can refuse to give you back to the position from which you have fallen—for his sake."

"It will come—it will come in time. I feel that he will do what is right—in his own good time."

"You cannot afford to wait for that. You are far too good to occupy your present position for another day or hour, unless your betrayer will consent to make wrong right. Pray trust me, my dear young lady. Though I am a rustic I have seen something of human nature, and I will act with discretion. I will not be precipitate."

"I would much rather you did not interfere. You don't know him. He is wayward and fanciful—you may turn him against me--and we are so happy now—utterly happy—and it may be only for a short time. He has been told that he may die young. When he has gone all my life may be one long repentance—one long atonement for having made his last years happy."

"My poor child, women have a natural bent for self-sacrifice, which too often leads them into sin. Come, come, my dear, don't cry; and remember whatever may happen I mean to be your friend."

Hester sighed. The circle of perfect love—that narrow, isolated spot in the universe in which she had been living for the last seven weeks was broken in upon suddenly from the outside world, and everything in this golden dream of hers took new lights and new colours when looked at by other eyes. In that sweet solitude of two, they had been like Hero and Leander, like Rosalind and Orlando, like any two creatures who exist only for each other, and for whom all the rest of creation is no more than a picturesque background to that dual life. Love in its first brief intensity scarcely believes in that outer world.

"Yes, my dear, however this story of yours may end—and I hope and believe it will not end badly—you may rely upon my friendship," said the Rector, "and if you want a woman's help or counsel my old maiden sister will not withhold it from you. When the world was thirty years younger I had a young wife whom I adored, and who had something of your complexion and contour, and a baby daughter. Before my little girl was three years old God took her; and her mother, who had been in weak health from the time of the child's birth, died within a year of our loss. Those two angel faces have followed me down the vale of years. I never see a child of my daughter's age without a little thrill of tenderness or pity. I never see an interesting girl of your age without thinking that my little girl might have grown up like her. So you see, Mrs. Hanley, I have a reason for being interested in you over and above my duty as a parish priest."

"You are all that is kind," faltered Hester, "and I wish I were worthier——"

"It is not you who are unworthy. No, I will say no more, lest I should seem harsh to one you love. May I walk part of the way home with you?"

"I shall be very pleased to have your company, but I have a boat close by."

"Then let me take you to your boat?"

He went with her to a little reedy inlet, where she had moored her dinghy, and he stood on the bank and watched her as she sculled the light boat away towards the setting sun, with the easy air of one used to the work.

"Poor child," sighed the Rector. "How strange that one is so apt to feel more interested in a sinner than in a saint. It is the mystery of human life that takes one's fancy, perhaps; the sinner's appeal to pity, as against the saint's confidence in her own holiness. I suppose that is why Mary Magdalene is the most popular character in the Gospel."

Hester rowed slowly up the sunlit river, creeping close in shore by the stunted willows which spread their low shadows across the water. She crept into the shadow as the wounded deer creeps away to die, stricken to the heart by her conversation with Mr. Gilstone. It was the first time she had been brought face to face with stern reality since she had allowed her lover to lead her by the hand into the fool's paradise of unsanctioned love. He had taught her to believe that the sanction meant very little, and that the loyalty and unselfishness of a mutual attachment were an all-sufficient proof of its purity; but these modern views of his did not stand by her for a quarter of an hour under the earnest interrogation of a village parson. All her old-fashioned ideas, her reverence for God's Word, her shrinking from man's disdain, rushed back into her mind, and Philosophy and Free Thinking were scattered to the winds. She stood confessed a woman dishonoured by the sacrifice love had exacted from her. She looked back to those quiet evenings by the river, when she and her father had walked up and down in the starlight, with Gerard Hillersdon beside them, sympathetic, respectful almost to reverence. Ah, what bliss it had been to listen or to talk with him in that tranquil hour when the burden of daily care had been laid down! What unalloyed happiness, without thought or fear of the future—without regret for the past!

How altered now were her thoughts, when to look back upon the past was horror, when to think of the future filled her whole being with aching fear!

This had been one of her rare days of solitude, and it was ending badly. Gerard had left for London after their leisurely breakfast, and was not to return till the eight-o'clock dinner. Business or whim had urged him to spend a day in the metropolis—to lunch at one of his clubs, and to hear the gossip of town and country from men who were "passing through"—to breathe that more piquant atmosphere of the world in which everybody knows everybody else's latest secret. The freshness and the quiet of the country would be all the more delicious, he told himself, after that brief plunge into the dust and movement of the town.

Hester had not pouted or looked sorrowful at his departure, but the day had been sorely long; and now this chance meeting with the Rector had filled her with sadness and apprehension—dread lest he should break the spell that held their tranquil lives, by a vain interposition upon her behalf. And then came the agonising thought that her lover, in spite of a devotion that seemed all-absorbing, did not love her well enough to make her his wife. Sophistry might make their union seem beautiful without the bond of marriage; but still that question remained unanswered—Why were they not married?

At this quiet evening hour, perhaps one of the saddest in Hester's life, there came suddenly upon her the sound of laughter—a man's frank laughter, joyous as the song of birds, joyous almost to ecstasy; and round the bend of the river a steam launch, gaily decked with crimson draperies and Oriental cushions, came quickly towards her, with the figures of its occupants defined against the brightness of the western sky. Foremost of the group stood the tall and lissom form of a young man with yellowish auburn hair and sharply cut features, and grouped about him were women in light summer gowns and airy hats, and other young men in white flannels. A ripple of laughter and joyous voices went past her as they passed, and then above it all rose that same mirthful laugh she had heard before the boat came in sight. The laughter of the man with auburn hair and pale, sharp-cut face was wafted up the river, in the wake of the boat, on the soft evening air. That joyous group of youthful strangers touched her with a keener sense of her own loneliness; her father mysteriously vanished out of her life; the friendship of all old friends for ever forfeited by her conduct; nothing and no one left to her save the man for whom she had surrendered all. If he should grow weary of her, if he should change, what had she on earth? Nothing! Her glances turned involuntarily to one deep shadowy pool she knew of under an inward curve of the bank. Nothing but death! And in the new dispensation of Darwin, Spencer, and Clifford, death by suicide was no more terrible than death by inevitable decay. There was no afterwards. There was no Great Father outside this little world to whom the self-destroyer had to render up his account.

At a quarter to eight came the glad sound of wheels—sound for which Hester had been listening for the last half-hour, and two minutes later Gerard was in the lamp-lit hall, amidst the cool freshness of newly cut roses, and Hester was in his arms, faltering her fond welcome between tears and laughter.

"Why, my darling, you are almost hysterical. This won't do, Hettie."

"The day has been so long. But you are home at last," she sighed, drying her tears, the first he had seen since one stormy burst of weeping which he must needs remember all his life—the passionate tears of a woman betrayed by the man she loved too well to punish, even by her resentment.

"Home at last—home by the very train and at the very hour I named—and uncommonly glad to be home, sweet wife!"

How glibly he pronounced the name—and yet, and yet, she blushed at the sound, as she had not done since its novelty had worn off, and she accepted the gospel of free thought. All that the good old parson had said to her was in her mind that night, though she smiled and brightened and grew happy in the companionship of the man she adored.

He had come home laden with gifts for her—books, trinkets—not valuable gems, since she steadfastly refused any such gifts—but the light and airy inventions of modern art—new settings of moonstones or starstones, fairy-like silver hair-pins, ornaments that would be worthless when their fashion was past, dainty toys and trifles to scatter about the tables, eccentricities in silver and enamel, Dresden china bonbon boxes, Japanese idols.

"Throw them into the river if you don't like them," he said, as they sat at the cosy round table after dinner, with the lamplight shining upon the glittering toys which Gerard produced one after another from a capacious leather bag, taking childlike pleasure in Hester's wondering admiration. "I am growing richer and richer—appallingly rich. My stocks and shares were chosen with such extraordinary foresight by that marvellous old man with the umbrella that the value of them has gone on increasing ever since he bought them. My Rosarios, my South-Westerns, my Waterworks, British and Foreign, my London Guarantee Shares—everything I own has an upward tendency. I cannot spend a quarter of my income, unless I do something wild and foolish. Think of something, Hester! Imagine some mad, delightful escapade which would cost us twenty thousand pounds. We must launch out somehow!"

"I can imagine nothing so wild or so foolish as my love for you," said Hester, growing suddenly thoughtful, "for when you cease to care for me I must die. There will be nothing left."

"Cease to care for you! While there is consciousness here"—touching his forehead—"that will never be!"

"And you really love me—with all your heart?"

"With all my heart, and mind, and strength. There's the Church Catechism for you. I am surprised I can remember so much of it."

CHAPTER XXI.

"AS GENTLE AND AS JOCUND AS A JEST."

Mr. Gilstone thought long and seriously of his interview with the young lady who was known to Lowcombe as Mrs. Hanley. In his many years' widowhood, during which his maiden sister Tabitha had cared for his creature comforts, kept his servants in order, maintained a spotless propriety throughout his roomy old house, and assisted him with counsel and manual labour in his cherished garden and churchyard, her mind had become the other half of his mind, and he had no secrets from her, not even the secrets of other people; so within a few hours of that conversation in God's Acre Tabitha Gilstone knew as much about Mrs. Hanley as her brother had been able to discover.

Tabitha was not surprised to hear that there was something wrong. That had been decided by the consentient voices of Lowcombe some weeks ago. Tabitha sorrowed for this poor young woman, as she always sorrowed for human error, with its inevitable sequence of human suffering, most especially when the sinner was young, and perhaps with just one extra touch of tenderness when the sinner was fair. She was sorrowful, but she was not surprised. She was not one of those women who are quick to pronounce the female sinner a calculating minx, and the male sinner an artless victim. She felt very angry with the unknown owner of the Rosary, and denounced him in unmeasured terms. "The scoundrel," she cried, "not content with having brought disgrace upon a pretty, refined young creature, he must needs try to pervert her mind. First he makes her an outcast, and then he makes her an Atheist."

"Don't be too hard, Bertha," remonstrated the Rector. "I dare say Mr. Hanley does not think he is doing any wrong in introducing this poor girl to the new learning. He thinks that he is leading her into the light of truth, not into the darkness of infidelity. You don't know how arrogant the new school of agnosticism is, how confident in materialism as the royal road to the well-being of mankind. For us who believe the unbelievers can find nothing but contemptuous pity. I expect to find this young man a difficult subject. He has been spoilt by too much wealth and a little learning."

"But you will do all you can, Basil," urged Miss Gilstone. "You will persuade him to behave honourably; or if he is wicked enough to refuse, I hope you will persuade that poor girl to leave him at once and for ever. Let her come to us if she is friendless; I will find a home for her, either in this house or with some of my friends."

"Ah, Tabitha, how many girls have we ever succeeded in turning from the way of evil while there were any flowers along the path? It is only when they come to the thorns and briers that they can be persuaded to turn back. However, I mean to do my uttermost in this case."

"And how much good you have done in such cases, Basil; how many happy wives and mothers on the other side of the world have to thank you that they are not outcasts in the streets of London!"

The keen impression made by her conversation with the Rector wore off as the dreamy days went by, and Hester once more was happy, and unashamed of her happiness, like Eve in Eden. The river was still at its loveliest, and Gerard and Hester spent the greater part of their days in a punt moored in some romantic backwater, or by some willowy eyot, he stretched in sybarite idleness among silken cushions, she reading aloud to him. She had a beautiful voice, and by long habit reading aloud had become very easy to her. Together in this way they dipped into W. K. Clifford and Herbert Spencer, Comte and Mill—he picking out chapters or essays for her to road, she accepting meekly whatever he put before her as the best. They read the poets also, in these golden afternoons, when there was just enough of coolness to make the west wind crisp and pleasant, and no hint of a wind from the east.

One morning she happened to mention the launch and the fair-haired, pale-faced young man whose joyous laughter had intensified her sadness.

"I felt very despondent that afternoon," she said, "and his laughter saddened me."

"Describe him to me again, Hester," said Gerard. "Stay." He sketched a profile lightly on the fly-leaf of a book, and handed the book to her. "Was your laughing youth like that?"

"Yes," she cried wonderingly, "that is the very face. You know him, then?"

"Yes, I know him."

He took a letter out of his pocket and re-read it frowningly, a letter that had come to him with his last batch from the Post Office at Reading.

"What has become of you? Where are you hiding yourself?" wrote Justin Jermyn. "Surely you are tired of your Garden of Eden by this time. I heard of you in London the other day, so you have not carried your bliss to some untrodden valley where the novelty of your environment might prolong the freshness of your feelings. I can fancy no impassioned love lasting more than six weeks. The strain upon mind and imagination is too great.

"May not one see you? Is your happiness too sacred for the vulgar eye of a friend? I feel sure the dear young lady would like *me*, however she may object to the ruck of your acquaintance—and for the rest I am discretion itself—a very lion's mouth for any secret you may drop into me; as deep, as silent as that deep water near the Church of St. George the Greater, where the enemies of the Venetian Republic sleep so soundly. Seriously, I am pining to see you. Tell me when and where I am to go to you. Remember, there is a mystic sympathy which links your life to mine. You cannot escape me. Whether you will or no, in your joys and in your sorrows, I shall be near you.—Yours for life, "J. J."

A hateful letter to Gerard in his present mood, rendered still more hateful by the idea that Justin Jermyn might be his near neighbour.

"Did you see the name of the launch?" he asked.

"No; I only noticed the young man's face, and that the girls who were grouped about him were handsome and attractive. Is he a man whom you dislike?"

"Yes, when I am away from him. But when I am in his company he always contrives to amuse and interest me, so that, in spite of myself, he seems my dearest friend."

"I understand," said Hester. "He is very clever—but not a good man. And yet he had such a joyous laugh, and seemed so happy."

"My dearest, do you think only the good people are happy? Some of the most joyous spirits in this world have gone along with hearts utterly and innately bad."

They were taking tea on the lawn a day or two after this conversation, their rustic table and restful wicker chairs grouped under a great weeping ash which had once been the chief feature of the cottage garden, when a boat shot rapidly towards the rustic landing stage, and a lissom form appeared upon the steps, and came with airy footsteps, mercurial, vivid as light, across the close-shorn turf.

"At last," cried Justin Jermyn. "I thought I could not be mistaken."

"In whom, or in what?" asked Gerard, starting to his feet and contemplating the uninvited guest with a most forbidding frown.

"In my old friend Mr. Hanley. I am staying with Matt Muller, the landscape painter, on his house-boat hard by Wargrave; and I heard, casually, the description of a certain Mr. and Mrs. Hanley, who are in some wise a mystery to the neighbourhood—the lady exquisitely beautiful (with a bow and a smile for Hester), the gentleman inordinately rich, young, idle—all that my dear friend Gerard is, in short. So I made a shrewd guess as to Mr. Hanley's identity, and—*me voici.* Pray present me to Mrs. Hanley."

He stood before them smiling, self-assured, light as Ariel himself, clad from top to toe in white, and with glints of sunlight in his blonde hair, and a delicate transparency in his blonde complexion, untouched by wind or weather. He looked as if nothing were further from his thoughts than the suspicion that his company could be in any wise distasteful.

Hester had risen in confusion, and stood leaning a little against one of the low branches of the ash, blushing painfully. This was the first visitor who had broken the spell of their sweet solitude, and, as in her meeting with the Rector, she felt again the sharp bitter sense of being brought face to face with that outer world which could but think ill of her.

"Mr. Jermyn—my wife," said Gerard, gravely, with emphasis upon the word wife.

Justin Jermyn dropped into one of the low chairs, settled himself in a nest of dainty Moorish cushions, and waited to be refreshed with tea, which Hester prepared for him with hands which trembled a little, despite her efforts at self-control. In her conversation with the Rector the sense of the old man's fatherly pity had been more than she could bear without tears. In the presence of Justin Jermyn that which she felt was the sense of hidden malignity, the consciousness of being despised and made light of by the man who fawned upon her.

She handed him his cup in silence, offered him the light dainties from the prettily decked table with the air of performing a social duty in which her inclination had no part, and when she had done this she opened a big Florentine umbrella, and walked slowly away, leaving the two men under the ash.

"How shy she is," said Jermyn, looking after her, "and how lovely! Even your rapturous tirades had hardly prepared me for so much beauty. Yes, it is the true Raffaelle face—the transparent

"Why did you hunt me down here?" demanded Gerard, rudely breaking in upon these encomiums. "Do you suppose that when a man has made a paradise for himself—remote and secret—he wants to be intruded upon by——"

"The serpent," interrupted Jermyn. "Perhaps not. Yet the serpent always finds his way in through some gap in the hedge. And after all there must be limits to the pleasures of a dual solitude. Love may remain unchanged, but ideas become exhausted, and the *tête-à-tête* begins to bore. If the serpent hadn't upset everything at an early stage in their union, how heartily sick of Eden Adam and Eve must have become by the time Cain and Abel were weaned. Don't be angry, Gerard. Granted that I am a pushing cad, and that I go where I like to go rather than where I am wanted. I come to you with all the news of the town—of the world—fresh in my mind, the scandals, and follies, and the social entanglements of which your newspapers tell you nothing. You can surely put up with me for an hour or so."

Gerard put up with him till midnight. He dined at the Rosary, and the little dinner of three had a gaiety which the *tête-à-tête* dinners had somewhat lacked lately. Even Hester was amused by a style of conversation that was new to her, and the unpleasant effect of Mr. Jermyn's personality wore off, and was almost forgotten. He evidently liked and admired Gerard, and that was much in his favour.

The moon was at the full, silvering wood and meadow, river and eyot, as they bade the visitor good night, and stood and watched him row down the stream towards Wargrave, a ghost-like figure in his white raiment, under that cold white light.

"He amused you, Gerard," said Hester, as they walked slowly back to the house. "I was glad to hear you laugh so merrily. We have been too serious of late. Our books have saddened us."

"Yes, they all tell the same story; that nature is everything and we are nothing. Jermyn is an amusing rascal, and as I told you yesterday, I like him well enough when I am with him."

"You called me your wife when you introduced him to me," murmured Hester, hiding her face upon his shoulder. "You will never let him find out that I am—anything less than your wife—will you, Gerard? I feel as if that man's scorn would wither me."

"His scorn! My dearest, he admires you beyond measure, and do you think he is the kind of man to be influenced in his opinion of any woman by a marriage certificate? He knows that I adore you. He shall never know anything else about us but that we are devoted to each other. And if he is ever wanting in reverence for you, in the smallest degree, he shall never enter our house again."

CHAPTER XXII.

"COMPARE DEAD HAPPINESS WITH LIVING WOE."

After that one evening's hospitable entertainment Mr. Jermyn considered himself free of the Rosary. He dropped in at any hour he liked, and always brought cheerfulness with him. He joined Hester and Gerard in their long, lazy mornings in the punt, discussed their books, old and new, seeming to know every book that had ever made its mark in the world, and to remember, as few readers remember. Gerard was certainly the gayer for his company, and listened with interest to an account of the visitors on the *Pegotty*, where Matt Muller received a society that could only be described as mixed. Happily the *Pegotty* was berthed at a distance of ten miles, and the painter's Bohemian guests rarely went over a mile beyond her moorings.

All the dreamy seriousness that had tinctured Hester and Gerard's long duologue evaporated in the presence of Justin Jermyn, as the mist wreaths melt from the riverside meadows under the broadening sunshine. The greatest problems in life and time were touched as lightly by Jermyn as the airiest nothings of tea-table gossip. It was impossible to be earnest in the society of a man for whom existence was a jest, and the Sybarite's luxury the supreme good below the stars.

"If I ever contemplate another world, it appears to me as a planet in which there is perpetual summer; a place where there are no bad cooks, and where the fowls of the air have no legs," he said, with his joyous laugh, when Hester pleaded for that last forlorn hope of man's progressive existence, somewhere, somehow.

Mr. Gilstone called twice at the Rosary during these halcyon days at the beginning of October, only to find that Mr. and Mrs. Hanley were out on the river. Gerard tossed the Rector's cards aside with a contemptuous laugh on the second time of finding them on the hall table.

"What pushing rascals these parsons are!" he exclaimed. "This fellow calls twice in ten days, instead of taking offence at my neglect. Wants money out of me for his schools, or his coal-club, no doubt. Well, the parson's life is not a happy life, as I know by home experience, and I'll reward his pertinacity with a comfortable cheque."

Hester turned red, and then pale, at the sight of the Rector's cards.

"He may not want money," she faltered.

"May not! My dearest, he is a priest. The priest who doesn't go for your purse is a black swan that I don't expect to find along this river."

"He may wish to see you."

"Then his wish shall remain ungratified. I am not going to let the world into our paradise by the thin end of the clerical wedge."

"You need not fear the world," Hester answered, with the first touch of bitterness that Gerard had heard in any speech of hers. "People know that there is something wrong in our lives. They have all held themselves aloof."

"The voice is the voice of my poetic Hester, but the words are the words of the Philistine," said Gerard lightly, as he left her.

She stood looking at the Rector's cards, lying far apart where Gerard's careless hand had flung them. She felt that she had offended the man whom she loved better than all the world besides. Oh, fool, self-conscious fool, to care for what that shallow or self-seeking world might think or say of her. Whatever she had sacrificed of womanly pride and self-respect, was it not enough reward to have made him happy—him for whom life was to be so brief, who had need to crowd into a few summers the love and gladness which for other men may be spread over the length of prosaic years, making a little spot of colour and light here and there on the dull grey woof of domestic monotony.

The Rector called a third time, and this time met the master of the house at the hall door.

"Good morning, Mr. Gilstone. Pray step inside my den here," said Gerard, throwing aside his hat. "I am ashamed that you should have troubled to pay me a third visit. I was on the point of sending you a cheque."

"I have not asked you for any money, Mr. Hanley," answered the Rector, gravely, seating himself in the proffered chair, and looking round the room with the shrewd glance of eyes that have been observing things for sixty-six years.

There was nothing in the cottage parlour, transformed into a study, to indicate dissipated habits; none of the slovenliness of the Bohemian idler. Many books, flowers everywhere, and an all-pervading neatness distinguished the apartment.

"You have not asked me? No, no," said Gerard, lightly, "but I know that in an agricultural parish there must be a good deal of poverty, and every well-to-do parishioner should pay his quota. Winter is approaching, though we may be beguiled into forgetting all about him in this delicious autumn. You are thinking of your coal and blanket club, I dare say. Allow me to write you a cheque." He opened a drawer, took out his cheque-book, and dipped his pen in the ink.

"No, Mr. Hanley," said the Rector, decisively; "I cannot take your money. I am here to talk to you of something much more precious than money."

"Of my soul, perhaps?" questioned Gerard, his countenance hardening. "I may as well tell you at once, Mr. Gilstone, that I am an unbeliever in the Christian revelation, and, indeed, in transcendentalism of all kinds."

"You are a Darwinian, I conclude?"

"No; I am nothing! I neither look before nor after. I want to make the most of life in the present, while it is mine. God knows, it is short enough for the longest lived amongst us—and death comes no easier to me, the unit, because I know the universe is working steadily towards the same catastrophe."

"You dread death?" asked the Rector.

"Who does not? Contemplate death in whatever form you will, he is the same hideous spectre. Sudden destruction, slow decay—who shall say which is the more terrible? But come now, Mr. Gilstone, you are not here to talk metaphysics. I say again, let me write you a cheque for your schools, your cottage hospital, your something."

"And I say again, Mr. Hanley, that I cannot take your money."

"Why not?"

"I cannot take money for alms from a man who is living in sin."

"Oh, that's your drift, is it, sir?" cried Gerard, springing to his feet. "You force yourself into my house in order to insult me!"

"No, Mr. Hanley. I am here in the hope of helping you to mend your life."

"What right have you to suppose that my life needs mending?"

"Say that it is only the shrewdness of an old man who has lived long enough to know something of human nature. Two young people with ample means do not live as you and Mrs. Hanley are living without some reason for their isolation, and in your case I take it the reason is that the lady is not your wedded wife. If that is so, let me, while your relations are still unknown to the world at large, marry you to this young lady, quietly, some morning, with no witness but my sexton and my dear old maiden sister, both of whom know how to keep a secret."

"My dear Mr. Gilstone, you are vastly obliging; but I am really a little amused at your *naiveté*. Do you really forget—suppose I am not legally married to the lady I call my wife—that there are plenty of registrars in England who would marry me to her as quietly as you can, and make no favour of the business?"

"I do not ignore the existence of registry offices where any groom in the county may be married to his master's daughter at a day or two's notice; but I think Mrs. Hanley would prefer to stand by your side at the altar, and to be married to you according to the ordinances of the Church."

"I do not think Mrs. Hanley has any profound belief in those ordinances. She is satisfied with the knowledge that she possesses my whole heart, and that her love has made me happy."

"And you accept her too willing sacrifice of virtue and good name, and reserve to yourself the privilege of deserting her when you are weary of her."

"You have no right to talk to me in this strain."

"Yes, Mr. Hanley, I have a right—the right of an old man and a parish priest, the right which comes from my deep pity for that innocent-looking girl whom you have made your victim. I have talked with her, and every word she uttered helped to assure me that she was not created to be happy in a life of sin. She is not the kind of woman to accept such a life readily—there must have been more than common art in the seducer who betrayed her——"

"Hold your tongue, sir," cried Gerard passionately. "How dare you pry into the lives of a man and woman whom you see united and happy; who ask nothing from you; neither your friendship nor your countenance; nothing except to be let alone. My wife—the wife of my heart and of my home—the wife I shall never forsake—is satisfied with her position, and neither you nor any one else has the right to interfere in her behalf. Your priesthood involves no privileges for one to whom all creeds are alike mischief-making and superstitious."

"I have been taught that the men who set aside old creeds have adopted humanitarianism as their religion," said the Rector; "but there is not much humanity in your reckless sacrifice of this young lady—who, I say again, was born for better things than to be——anything less honoured than your wife."

"You have talked with her?" said Gerard, suddenly; "when and where?"

"I found her in the churchyard one afternoon, and we had a little quiet talk together."

"I understand; just enough to make her unhappy and absurdly sensitive upon a question which I thought she and I had settled for ever," retorted Gerard angrily. "Did she ask you to call upon me? Are you her ambassador?"

"No. She is only too unselfish. You do not look like a scoundrel, Mr. Hanley, and your conduct in this matter is a mystery to me. You are rich, independent. Why should you refuse to legalise a tie which you own has made you happy? Is there any impediment? Are you married already?"

"I have no wife but Hester."

"But you have some reason——?"

"Yes, I have my reason—and as I do not believe in priestcraft or in father-confessors you must pardon me, Mr. Gilstone, if I refuse to explain that reason to you, a total stranger, whose sympathy, or whose curiosity, I have not invited."

"Enough, Mr. Hanley. I am sorry for that ill-used young lady, about whose conscience and whose social status you are equally indifferent. If you should alter your determination and make up your mind to act as a man of honour, you may command me in any way or at any time; but until you do so I shall not again cross your threshold."

"So be it—but pray bear in mind, Rector, that you have crossed my threshold unasked, and that you cannot expect me to be appalled at your threat of withholding an acquaintance which I never sought."

He rang for the servant, and himself accompanied the Rector to the hall door, where they parted with ceremonious politeness.

He was angry with this stranger's intrusion upon his life, angry with Hester for having betrayed their secret. She came in from the garden directly after Mr. Gilstone's departure, fluttered and pale, having seen the Rector going out at the gate.

For the first time Gerard received her with a frowning brow, and in gloomy silence.

"The Rector has been with you," she said timidly, seating herself in her accustomed nook by the window, where she had her work-basket and little book-table.

Gerard was slow to answer. She had time to take her work out of the basket, and to put in a few tremulous stitches before he spoke.

"Yes, the Rector has been here—an old acquaintance of yours, it seems."

"Not very old, Gerard. I have only spoken to him once in my life."

"Only once; and in that once you contrived to make him acquainted with all your grievances."

"Gerard, how cruelly you speak! I told him nothing—nothing. He guessed that all was not well—that I was living a life which, in his sight, is a life of sin. Oh, Gerard, don't be hard upon me. I have never worried you with my remorse for my own weakness, but when that good old man talked to me so kindly, so gently——"

"You played the tearful Magdalen—allowed a bigoted old Pharisee to humiliate you by his pitying patronage—sent him to me to urge me to legalise our union—to legalise, forsooth! As if law ever held love."

"I did not send him to you. I begged him not to interfere."

"You could at least have told me of your conversation with this man, and so prepared me for being sermonised."

"I could not speak of it, Gerard. There are things one cannot speak of."

She bent very low over her work to hide her tears, feeling instinctively that tears would be hateful to him in his present humour. In all the days they had spent together she had kept tears and sadness to herself. For him she had been all sunshine.

He took two or three impatient turns in the small room, where the cramped space only irritated him.

"Hester, are you tired of me, and our life here?" he asked, stopping suddenly in front of the window by which she was seated.

"Tired! Gerard, you know my life begins and ends with you. I have given up everything else—this world and the next. I have nothing to care about, nothing to hope for but you."

"If I were free to marry you I should need no priestly bidding; but I am not free. I am bound hard and fast by an old tie, which I cannot loosen, yet awhile at any rate. I may be able hereafter to free myself—without dishonour: or I may never be free."

"Do not speak of it, Gerard. I have asked nothing of you. Mr. Gilstone believed that he had a duty to do. He has done it. That is all."

Her gentle patience touched him. He seated himself by her side, took the work out of the unsteady hands which were only spoiling it, and drew her to his heart.

"You are only too good to me, Hester," he said; "let us be happy, dearest, happy in spite of the conventionalities, happy as Shelley and his Mary were, in the beginning of their union, before law had set its seal upon the bond of love. Some day Church and State may seal our marriage—but it will make the bond no stronger."

He had not forgotten what the Rector had said of her. Yes, she was of the stuff of which wives are made. She was not the kind of woman to accept degradation easily. And then he told himself that there was no degradation in their union, that he was a fool to consider the world's opinion, or be influenced by the narrow views of a village parson.

After that day there was no word spoken by either Gerard or Hester of the Rector's visit. He came no more to the Rosary, nor did any one else in the parish call upon the new-comers. Perhaps the involuntary look of distress in Mr. Gilstone's countenance, when Mr. and Mrs. Hanley were again discussed at a village tea-drinking, may have confirmed his parishioners in their suspicions of evil. The old speculations were repeated, the old assertion was reiterated, to the effect that people who did not desire to be visited or to visit must be innately bad, and the Rector held his peace. He started a new subject, and even affected not to know that any one had been talking about the Hanleys. He was sore at heart when he thought of that fair and lovable girl, before whom the future seemed so dark an outlook.

For Hester the world was not quite what it had been before her conversation with the Rector. An unspeakable sadness stole over her spirits when she remembered the bitter shame of that hour in which she found herself face to face with an orthodox follower of the Gospel, and saw her position as it looked in his eyes. A gnawing remorse had fastened upon her heart. She looked back with sick regret to the days of poverty and hard labour, the long walks through the arid streets, the long hours at her sewing-machine, and all the little domestic cares that had been needed to eke out scanty resources, and make her father's life comfortable. Gladly would she have gone back to the drudgery could she have been as she was then—without fear or reproach. The plethora of wealth in which she lived—the flowers, the frivolities, the wastefulness which she had no power to control, shocked and pained her. She felt like an Indian wife in some luxurious zenana, helpless, hopeless, irresponsible. The fact that her future was amply provided for, a fact of which Gerard had assured her in the most delicate manner, gave her no satisfaction. She could not conceive the possibility of life when he was gone.

She bore her burden in silence. He for whom she had sacrificed religion and good name never knew of those long watches of the night in which her thoughts were full of sadness. He never saw her tears or heard her complain of all that was painful in her position at the Rosary. The October days drew in; the harmony in red and gold and russet, which had made autumnal woods lovelier than summer foliage, gradually faded to the dull grey of winter. At every breath of the wind the dead leaves came gently showering down, with sound as faint as a snowfall, and all the upper branches of beech and elm were bare, while here and there some sturdy oak still spread boughs of red or gold against the iron sky.

The days were short, and often too cold for idle hours upon the river. Scarcely had the wintry sun sloped toward the westward curve of the reedy shore when the pale mist of night began to creep over the meadows and along the river, until it slowly rose and wrapped house and garden in one dense cloud. Hester's tender care guarded Gerard from those river fogs with strictest watchfulness, for had not he told her Dr. South's poor opinion of his lungs? Thus the long evenings might have hung heavily upon them both had they not both been students, for whom the longest life would have been only too short for the unexplored, inexhaustible world of books. To study the catalogues of booksellers, to read the advertisements of new books in the *Athenæum*, and to order every book that took his fancy made one unfailing source of amusement for Gerard Hillersdon, and with these long, quiet evenings old ambitions revived.

He would write a novel—he would write that narrative poem which had been simmering in his mind for years, that story in verse which was to have all the depth of Browning and all the delicacy of Tennyson, all the dash, wit, and chic of Owen Meredith, with all the passion of Swinburne, a poem which, if it succeeded, should mark a new era in poetry.

He loved to talk of his unrealised dreams, and Hester loved to listen. Thus the wintry evenings were seldom too long, and Hester, seeing him happy, felt that her sacrifice had not been in vain, and told herself again and again that her own feelings were as nothing when weighed against his content.

He went up to London one bright October day, and saw Dr. South, who expressed himself altogether hopefully.

"You have been taking life easily," he said, "and the result is all I could wish, more than I hoped. Your heart is better, your lungs are stronger. We cannot give you a new heart, but we can make the old one wear much longer than I thought possible the last time I saw you. Frankly, you were in a very bad way just then."

Gerard heard this verdict with delight. So far from being tired of this world he had a greed of life. He could comtemplate old age with calmness. That season which to the mind of youth is ordinarily a jest and yet a horror had for him no terrors. He could contemplate long years of luxurious repose, in that palace of art which he had built for himself, and to which every year of declining life should bring new treasures. He could think of himself seated among his books, his statues, pictures, gems, curios; white-haired, white-bearded, wise with the hoarded wisdom of a long life; a man to whom young men should come as they went to Protagoras, to hear golden words of philosophic counsel. Fate had given him the gold which can buy such an old age as this. He thought of Samuel Rogers, of Stirling Maxwell—of the few men who seem to have drunk the wine of life to the lees, and yet to have found no bitterness in the cup; and he saw before him the possibility of a life as perfect as theirs, could but life itself hold out. That was the one all-absorbing desire—to keep the bond intact between consciousness and this clay—without which he had been taught to believe consciousness must cease to be.

He went back to the Rosary after that interview with Dr. South happier than he had been for some time. He felt his youth renewed, the shadow of impending doom removed from his path. He was more than ever devoted to Hester. He told her the doctor's opinion, and kissed away her tears of joy.

In Devonshire there had been some anxiety about him. Mr. and

Mrs. Hillersdon had returned from a long stay at Royat and a delightful tour in the south-west of France. They were now installed at the Rectory, where Lilian was occupied with preparations for her marriage.

"Mother is very disappointed to hear that you are not coming to us before Christmas," wrote Lilian. "She wants to thank you for all the pleasure your money has afforded her and father; and to tell you how easy and luxurious our travels were made by your generous gift. For my part I have worlds to tell you, and I shall be unhappy till we meet. We stayed three days in town, for father to see his old friends at the clubs and to dine with some clerical bigwigs, and for mother and me to do our shopping, which was tremendous. We went on the very first morning to Hillersdon House, and it was a blow to find that you were not there or likely to be there for an indefinite time. Your servants were rather mysterious about you—servants love mystery, don't they? Your paragon housekeeper was at Brighton, your butler had gone for an airing in the Park. The footman did not know your address, but told me in the most condescending way that our letters would be forwarded to you; so I live in the hope that you will receive this letter somewhere, by land or sea, in a shooting-lodge in the Highlands, or on a Norwegian lake.

"I am very unhappy about that poor girl in whose fate you were as much—or almost as much—interested as I was. I mean Hester Davenport. After having failed in finding you, I drove to Chelsea, hoping to find Hester. I wanted to take her to lunch with mother at the Alexandra, and then to a picture gallery, just to make a little break in her monotonous life. But I found her rooms empty, and her landlady was very doleful about her. She left one morning in the middle of August; paid what was owing, put together a few things in a Gladstone bag, sent her landlady's little boy for a cab, and drove off, Heaven knows where. Her father had disappeared mysteriously a few days before, and the landlady thought this had upset poor Hester. She was very much agitated when leaving, quite unlike her usual self. She gave no address, but a fortnight afterwards the landlady received a few lines from her, telling her to send any letters that might be waiting for her, addressed to H., at the Post Office, Reading. Two of Whiteley's men came about the same time with an order from Hester, packed up all her books, her father's clothes and belongings, in two deal cases, addressed them to the South-Western Station, Reading, to be called for, and left them ready for the railway people to take away. Nothing more has been heard of Hester or her father at their old lodgings. The landlady cried when she talked of them, and she evidently thinks there is something wrong. I have a good mind to write to Hester, and address my letter to the Reading Post Office, and yet what can I say to her? It is all so mysterious; first the old man's disappearance, and then her sudden flight. It seemed like a flight, did it not?

"Jack was very glad to see us on our return. He has been working hard all the summer, has had neither holiday nor change of air; but now he is coming down to Helmsleigh for the harvest festival, and we are all going to be very happy. We want you to complete our happiness."

Gerard destroyed this letter directly he had read it, knowing how these words of his sister would have distressed Hester. She had spoken of Lilian very rarely, and he had heard the deep regret in her tone, the sorrow for the loss of a friendship that had been very dear, the hopelessness of that friendship's renewal. Not for worlds would he have her reminded of the morning of her flight, with its agony of conflicting emotions, shame, regret, fond self-sacrificing love, courage to meet the worst that fate could bring, for his sake. He could recall her face now in its rigid whiteness, as the cab drove up to the station door where he stood ready to receive her. They had parted only a few hours before in the rosy flush of morning. They were meeting now never to part again, Gerard told her, as they sat side by side in the railway carriage, careless whither the train took them on their first journey together.

Lilian's letter brought back the memory of that morning to Gerard, and with it a revival of his tenderest feelings. How gentle, how utterly unselfish she had been in the despair which went with her surrender; how careful that he should not suffer from her remorse! He began to think seriously of trying to free himself from his promise to Edith Champion—that promise made in her husband's lifetime, and of which she had said, "Remember, it is an oath." He began to think of confessing the new tie with which he had bound himself, and appealing to Edith's generosity to release him. He thought of this, but as it was a thing which could be done at any time, he was in no haste to do it. Should new obligations arise—should there be the promise of a child to be born to him—well, in that case it might be his duty to release himself, at any cost, from that older tie.

Justin Jermyn dropped in frequently during these shortening autumnal days, always full of animal spirits, always with his budget of little social scandals, which set everybody in a ridiculous light, and offered food for laughter. What a preposterous world it seemed, contemplated from his standpoint and how could anybody be serious about it, or care by what slow linking together of infinitesimals, by what processes, molecular or nebular, this speck in the universe had come to be the thing it is? Hester hated his mocking talk, but she was glad to see Gerard amused within the narrow limits of the Rosary. Had there been no such visitor as Jermyn, he might have wanted to go to London oftener, perhaps. So in some wise she had reason to be grateful to Jermyn.

Matt Muller, the landscape painter, to whom the Thames had been a gold mine, was still living on his house-boat, despite those autumnal mists which were more conducive to art than to health. He was building himself a cottage and painting-room on the river bank, and had the delightful duty of watching the bricklayers at their work. Jermyn oscillated between London and Mr. Muller's house-boat, and was always fresh and metropolitan, while the painter, he protested, had lapsed into a bovine state of being, and thought of nothing but the canvas on his easel and the cottage that was slowly rising out of a level stretch of meadow land.

Jermyn stayed later than usual one evening after dining at the Rosary. The weather had been exceptionally fine during the last few days. This was St. Luke's summer, as Hester said, with a faint sigh, when she heard the church bells pealing along the river, and remembered the date, the eighteenth of October, St. Luke's Day—day which, in the years that were past, had seen her kneeling in her place at church; day which for her henceforth meant only the uncertified anniversary of a problematical personage.

She had spent the morning on the river with Gerard, tempted by the warmth of the sunshine which gilded meadow and islet. They had stayed out till the edge of dusk, and, creeping slowly home in their punt, had found Jermyn pacing the lawn by the water, looking out for their return.

"I have come to offer myself for dinner," he said, as he helped Hester out of the boat. "It is ages since I have bored you with my society—a week at the very least—and I have brought you a budget of news, Gerard; news not altogether fit for Mrs. Boffin," shaking his finger at Hester, "so I must keep it for our half-hour in your cosy tabagie."

"Your half-hours in the smoking-room are very long," said Hester.

"Their length proves that I can interest Gerard. You ought to be very grateful to me, Mrs Hanley. He would expire of ennui in this delicious retreat if I did not bring him a faithful report of all the malicious things that are done and said in London."

"I have forgotten the meaning of the word ennui since I came to the Rosary," said Gerard; "so you may suppress all desire to patronise us upon that score. When the leaves are all off the trees and the Thames begins to look dreary, we shall take wing for the Riviera."

"I will meet you at Monte Carlo. I am more at home there than anywhere," said Jermyn, gaily.

"I doubt if we shall go to Monte Carlo."

"Oh yes, you will. You won't go, perhaps—you'll gravitate there. It has been called the loadstone rock, don't you know. It will draw you, as that rock in the story drew the nails out of Sinbad's vessel. You will find yourself powerless against the fascination of one of the loveliest spots upon this earth. I shall be just as sure of meeting you there as Cæsar's shade was of meeting Brutus at Philippi."

The dinner passed gaily. The lamplit table was brilliant with the beauty of decay, decked with autumn leaves and berries of various and harmonious colouring, which Hester had collected that morning in a woodland walk, while the world was all fresh and dewy. The evening was so mild that the two young men were able to smoke their after-dinner cigars and enjoy their after-dinner talk pacing up and down the gravel path in front of the drawing-room, while Hester sat in the lamplight by the hearth, where a fire of pine logs gave a show of cheerfulness without too much heat. She had her work and her books about her, and the girlish figure in the white gown in the brightly-furnished room made a graceful picture of home-life altogether unlike that vision of Bohemianism and debauchery which the spinsters of Lowcombe imagined within the walls of the Rosary.

"Does Mrs. Hanley go with you to the South?" inquired Jermyn, after they had exhausted his stock of London gossip, and were lapsing into thoughtfulness.

The night was even lovelier than the day had been; the sky was full of stars, and now towards ten o'clock, the late moon was rising round and golden from behind a wooded hill on the opposite shore.

"Natürlich. Did you suppose I should leave her behind?"

"I only suppose there is an end to all things. You have had a very long honeymoon."

"We are not tired of each other yet."

"No?" interrogatively. "And poor Mrs. Champion, whom the world declares you are to marry directly she is out of her weeds. It will be rather rough upon her if you marry any one else."

"That is a matter for the lady's consideration and mine—not for yours."

"I apologise. After all the chief aim in this life is to be happy, and so long as you are happy with the lady yonder—a most lovely and amiable creature——"

"For God's sake hold your tongue! You mean kindly to us both, I dare say—but every word you say increases my irritation."

"My dear Hillersdon, how sensitive you are. Strange that a position which seems to have secured your happiness should not bear discussion—even with an intimate friend."

Gerard turned upon his heel, and went back to the house, Jermyn following him, and the two young men spent the rest of the evening in the drawing-room with Hester, where their talk was no longer of living people, but of books and ideas, and of great minds that have gone out into the Unknown. Hester was always carried away by talk of this kind, carried away from remorseful brooding, from the consciousness of an abiding sorrow. In that shadowy world of speculative thought all painful feelings were merged in the one great mystery, what we are and whither we are going; whether that individual existence, so agonisingly distinct to-day, shall to-morrow merge and melt into the infinitesimal life which builds the coral reef and recomposes the earth we tread on.

Such conversations always left her in deepest melancholy. Yet she took a morbid pleasure in them, as people do in books that make them cry.

The wood fire and the lamplight had heated the low cottage drawing-room over much before Justin Jermyn left, and when he was gone Gerard opened the window, and let in the cool, soft air, and the wide sweep of moonlit sky, above a ridge of firs which bounded the landscape. The moon was high in the midmost heaven by this time, riding triumphantly amidst that glorious company of stars which look like her satellites. Hester and Gerard stood at the open window, contemplating the sky and river, glad to be alone, albeit they had not wearied of Jermyn, who had a knack of being interesting upon any subject. They were both silent, both full of thought, glad to rest after the animated discussion of the last two hours.

"Hark!" said Gerard, suddenly. "Some one has opened the garden gate. Jermyn is coming back. What can he want?"

Hester's ear was quicker than his. She heard a step upon the travel, a feeble, dragging footstep, as of one who was weary unto death.

"It is not his step," she said. "It is some one who is old and feeble."

As she spoke there came creeping out of the shadow of the shrubbery, and round by the angle of the house, a figure that had a spectral look in the moonlight which silvered the face and shone white upon the travel-stained raiment. It was the figure of an old man with ragged grey beard and tall, gaunt form. The bent shoulders, the slow movements, indicated uttermost weariness.

The man came tottering towards the lamplit window, leaning upon his stick; he came closer and closer, till he was face to face with Hester, and then with a loud cry he lifted his stick and pointed at her triumphantly.

"I knew it," he cried hysterically, "I knew it was you. I knew I had found you—at last—found you in the midst of your infamy—living in luxury while your old father has been starving. Yes, by Heaven, within an ace of starvation—living in sin——"

"Father," cried Hester, piteously, stretching out her hands to him, trying to put her arms about him, "father, you have no cause to blame me. It was you who left me. I was giving you my life—would have given it you till my last breath—but you left me—left me without a word—alone and fatherless."

Sobs choked her. She could say no more. She could only shape the words dumbly, while he thrust her from him with a savage gesture.

"Don't touch me," he cried, "I renounce you—I have done with you——"

And then from the father's lips came one of those foul words which brand like red-hot iron. The daughter sank in an agony of shame at his feet—not fainting, only too keenly conscious of her misery.

To be called that name—and in Gerard's hearing. What could her life be ever more after this night but one everlasting sense of shame?

Her hands were clasped over her face, as she half knelt, half crouched, upon the ground. In those few moments there was time for that one thought, "I am that thing which he has called me." And then she heard Gerard's hoarse cry of rage, a blow, a groan, and her father had fallen like a log on the gravel path beside her.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"ALAS, WHY CAM'ST THOU HITHER?"

HE was not dead. Hester, in the first few minutes of helpless horror, thought that the blow which had felled her father to the ground must needs be his death-blow; but it was not so. Her trembling fingers loosened the wisp of rusty black which he wore round his throat; she felt the beating of his heart under the ragged flannel shirt. She heard the stertorous breathing, which, however dreadful, at least indicated life.

"Go for the doctor," she cried. "Oh, for God's sake, the doctor—without the loss of a moment. You have not killed him."

"Killed him! no. I only ventured to silence his foul tongue—the ungrateful old scoundrel. My blow was not murderous—but I meant to silence him, and I have done it," said Gerard, with a scornful laugh.

It seemed such a worthless life to him, these poor dregs of a wasted existence. Age, poverty, drunkenness, what had such a man to live for, or how should such a man value life?—and yet if one made an end of this wretched remnant of used up humanity the act would be called murder, and one might be hanged for it.

What should be done? Send for a doctor? Yes. It was past one o'clock, and the nearest doctor was at Lowcombe, a mile off, a medical practitioner whose function it was to see a scattered population in and out of the world, a population dispersed at inconvenient distances, approachable only by accommodation roads, within a radius of six or seven miles.

"I'll go to the gardener's cottage and try to get a messenger," said Gerard. "Don't be frightened, Hester. Just keep quiet till I come back."

He ran off towards the gardener's house, on the other side of the road, adjoining a large kitchen garden where the said gardener delighted in the cultivation of a vast stock of vegetables which nobody consumed, and in the consumption of seeds which ought to have been enough to sow vegetables over all the waste ground in Berkshire.

He was gone, and Hester's fears grew more intense as she knelt beside the motionless form, listening to the labouring breath. Had he fainted, or was it some kind of stroke which made him unconscious? She went into the house for water to bathe his temples. She tried to force a spoonful of brandy between the pallid lips, but without success. She could only watch the face, which the moonlight whitened, and note how it had aged and altered for the worse since August. Those few months had done the work of years. Every line had deepened, and there was something worse than age, the pale, dull, soddened look of the habitual drunkard.

Gerard came back after a quarter of an hour that seemed an age.

"Dowling has started," he said. "I waited till I had seen him go. It's nearly an hour's walk there and back. Your folly in setting your face against a stable has left us without a messenger in a dilemma like this. Hasn't he got his senses back yet?"

He stood looking down at the figure stretched at full length across the pathway. The path in front of the verandah was narrow, but by a happy chance Nicholas Davenport had fallen with his head upon the edge of the lawn, where the turf was thick and soft. Gerard looked down at him with but little compunction, a sorry figure in mud-stained clothes, boots split and down at heel, trousers torn at the knees and ragged at the edge.

"I wonder whether the Rector of Lowcombe would urge me to make this man my father-in-law," thought Gerard; and then moved by some better feeling he stooped down to lift the heavy head from the ground, and with Hester's help conveyed the unconscious form into the drawing-room, and laid it on the sofa, where Hester placed a down pillow under the ragged grey hair, and spread a plush coverlet over the motionless limbs.

"Is there anything else that we can do?" she asked piteously.

"I am afraid not. I am lamentably ignorant of all medical treatment. If Lilian were here she would be ever so much more use. I'm afraid it is some kind of fit."

"Do you think he is dying?" Hester asked, horror-stricken.

She was kneeling by the sofa, holding her father's hand, which was cold and inert.

"I don't know. I know nothing, except that his fall just now can hardly have killed him."

"If it had you would have been his murderer," she said, horrified at his callousness.

"Would you have preferred me to stand by and hear him insult you—you who have been his devoted slave—who sacrificed all the joys of girlhood to his necessities?"

No, he had no compunction. This dotard had broken in upon their lives, bringing horror and agitation into their peaceful home; this dotard to whom Hester owed nothing, who had been already overpaid in filial duty. He had no compunction, he the young man who had raised his hand against age and feebleness. He had no more regret for this thing that he had done than he might have felt if he had kicked a strayed mongrel from his threshold. He was angry with the hazard of life which had brought this most ineligible visitor to his retreat, and had perhaps made a happy union with Hester impossible henceforward. He knew her exaggerated ideas of duty to this drunken log, knew her willingness to sacrifice herself. How could he tell what line she would take?

Legalise their union, forsooth! Create a legal link between himself and yonder carrion. Go through the rest of his life ticketed with a disreputable father-in-law. He could not stay in the room with that unconscious item of poor humanity. He went out and paced the gravel walk from end to end, and back again, and back again, with monotonous repetition, waiting for the coming of the doctor, who did not come. The gardener came back in something less than an hour, to say that the doctor had been summoned to a distant farmhouse, where there was a baby expected, and would doubtless remain there till the arrival of the baby. The farmhouse was nearly five miles on the other side of Lowcombe.

All that the doctor's wife could promise was that her husband should go to the Rosary as soon as possible after his return home.

Thus, through the long October night there was nothing to be done but to wait and watch in patience. The air grew chill as morning approached, and Gerard came back to the drawing-room, where Hester had kept up the fire, and where the lamp was still burning. The old man's breathing was quieter, and he seemed now to have sunk into a heavy sleep.

"He will do well enough," said Gerard, looking at the unlovely sleeper. "There is a Providence that watches over drunkards."

"Gerard, Gerard, how cruel you are!"

"Do you expect me to be kind? I would have given thousands to keep that man out of our life."

"You gave him the money that set him on the wrong path," she said.

"I gave him money to get rid of him. I saw your life sacrificed to an imaginary claim. I saw your youth fading—your beauty with a blight upon it—the blight of poverty and care. He was the only bar to our happiness, and I swept him out of my way. We have been happy, Hester. For pity's sake don't tell me you care more for that wreck of humanity than you care for me!"

"I care for him because he is my father, and has such sore need of my love."

"Ah, that is the old story. Well, you can go on caring for him—vicariously. We will put him in a sanatorium where his declining years will be made comfortable, and where he will be protected from his pernicious propensities."

She took no notice of this speech. She was sitting, as she had sat through the greater part of that night, holding her father's hand, stooping now and then to moisten his forehead with a handkerchief dipped in Eau-de-Cologne, listening to his breathing, hoping for the daylight and the coming of the doctor.

Daylight came at last, chilly and misty, and soon after daylight Mr. Mivor, the long-established and trusted family practitioner, was ushered into the room by a sleepy housemaid, who had heard with wonder that there was an invalid in the house—some one who had arrived unexpectedly in the night, and for whom a bedroom was to be aired and made ready. Hester had gone upstairs at daybreak to call the servants, and had seen to the lighting of a fire in this unused bedroom, a pleasant room enough, looking out over the high road and kitchen garden to the park-like meadows beyond.

Mr. Mivor had heard various conversations about the young couple at the Rosary, but as a discreet practitioner and a man of the world had refrained from all expression of opinion. He was not the less interested in this social mystery, and his curiosity was considerably increased by what he saw this morning—those two pale faces, the man's sullen and heavy, the woman's haggard with anxiety, and between them this shabby, disreputable figure, this sodden countenance, in which the medical eye was quick to see the indications of habitual intemperance.

"When did the seizure occur?" he asked, after he had made his examination.

"Soon after one o'clock."

"Was he in good health up to that time?"

"I don't know. He came into the house—an unexpected visitor—and dropped down almost immediately. He has been unconscious ever since," Gerard answered deliberately.

"And there was no exciting cause—no quarrel, no shock of any kind?" interrogated the doctor, with a sharp look at the speaker.

"It may have been a shock to him to find us—in his state of mind—which I take it was not of the clearest."

"You think he had been drinking?"

"I think it more than likely he had."

Mr. Mivor postponed all further questions. He took out a neat little leather case, which he was in the habit of carrying with him on his professional rounds, and from this closely packed repository he selected a powder which he administered to the patient with his own hands, gravely watchful of him all the time. The old man's eyes opened for a moment or two, only to close again.

"You will want a trained nurse," he said presently, "if this person is to remain in your house—and, indeed, it would not be safe for him to be moved for some days."

"He will remain here, and I shall help to nurse him," said Hester, who had resumed her seat by the sleeper's pillow. "He is my father."

"Your father! I did not quite understand," said the doctor, not a little surprised at this revelation, for he had noted the ragged flannel shirt, the greasy coat-collar, and the general aspect of foulness and decay which made the old man's presence in that room a cause of wonder.

Her father! This poor human wreck the father of the beautiful Mrs. Hanley, about whom there had been so many speculations! Were some of her malevolent detractors right after all, and did she really come from the gutter?

He looked at the old man's face more thoughtfully than before. Bloated and disfigured as those features were by evil habits, they did not show the coarse modelling which is supposed to go with low birth.

The hand lying inert on the plush coverlet was slender and finely formed—a hand that had never been hardened by the day-labourer's work. The man might once have been a gentleman. The capacity for intemperance is sometimes immeasurable even in gentle blood.

Mr. Mivor was not quite satisfied with the aspect of the case. He did not implicitly believe that story of the old man's entrance upon the scene, and immediate seizure. The stroke was a paralytic stroke, he had no doubt of that—but he suspected that there was something being kept from him, and he was all the more suspicious after Mrs. Hanley's admission of her relationship to the patient. His duty, however, lay clear before him. Whatever might have happened in the small hours of the night that was gone—even if there had been a quarrel between the old man and the young one, and violence of some kind, as he suspected—the man was not dead. His duty was to cure him, if he could, and his interest was to keep his suspicions to himself.

"I'll telegraph to London for a hospital nurse, if you like," he said.

"Pray do," assented Gerard, ringing the bell. "I'll send off your telegram as soon as it is written."

"And in the meantime," said the doctor, writing his message at a table where there were all the necessary materials ready to his hand, "I will help you to get the patient comfortably to bed."

"His room is quite ready," Hester said. "I can do anything for him—I am used to waiting upon him."

"He has been ill before now, I suppose, then?"

"Never so bad as this. I never saw him lose consciousness as he did last night—after he fell."

Her faltering accents and the distress in her face assured Mr. Mivor that his conjecture was well founded, but he pressed her with no further questioning, and quietly, with the skill and gentleness of the trained practitioner, he assisted the scared manservant to carry the slumbering form to the room above, and assisted Hester in removing the weather-stained outer garments, and settling the patient comfortably in the bed that had been made ready.

The fire burned cheerily in the old-fashioned grate, the autumn sun shone brightly outside. The room with its dainty French paper and white furniture looked fresh and pure as if it had been prepared for a bride—and there on the bed lay the victim of his own vices—those negative sins of sloth and intemperance which are supposed to injure only the sinner.

"My poor father has been wandering about the country till his clothes have got into this dreadful state," Hester said to the doctor, apologetically, as she laid the wretched garments on a chair. "I have a trunk full of his things in the house, ready for him when he wants them. I suppose it is my duty to tell you that he has been the victim of intemperate habits, induced in the first instance by acute neuralgia. He is very much to be pitied, poor dear. You won't tell any one, will you?"

"Tell any one! My dear young lady, what do you think doctors are made of? Family secrets are as sacred for us as they are for the priesthood. It was very easy for me to guess that drink—and only drink—could have brought a gentleman to this sad pass. And now I shall leave you to take care of him till the nurse arrives. I dare say she will be here early in the afternoon. I'll look in before dark."

When he was gone Hester examined her father's pockets. In the large outside pocket of the shooting-jacket there was a shattered volume of Horace, containing the satires, the margins annotated in Nicholas Davenport's small penmanship—penmanship which had retained something of its original microscopic neatness, in spite of shaken nerves and tremulous fingers.

In the breast-pocket of the same coat there were a good many pages of manuscript, with many interlineations and blottings, indicative of strenuous labour. These were all of the same character, metrical translations of some of the satires. These attempts indicated extraordinary labour, the same passages being reproduced over and over again—now in one metre, now in another—but no section of the work was finished. There were all the marks of a weakened will directing a once powerful intellect.

Hester gave these pages to Gerard presently when he came in to look at the patient. She gave them to him in silence, not even looking at him, lest her face should express too intense a reproach. These laboured translations proved how completely the scholar had been duped by the man who had deliberately tempted him back into the way of vice.

"Poor fellow! Yes, he tried to earn my money. He had the instinct of a gentleman. I was a scoundrel, and you do well to hate or to despise me. I am worthy of nothing better."

"Hate you!" she repeated, in a low, broken voice, "you know I can never do that. You did not realise what you were doing, or you never could have done such a cruel thing. You have ruined him, body and soul; but I am as much to blame as you. If I had been true to myself and to him, I might have found him and brought him back."

"Yes, if you had sacrificed youth, and love, and loveliness, and all fair things in this brief life for that worn-out hulk. No, Hester, I am not brutal, I am not heartless. I am sorry for him; but he is the victim of his own instincts, and if the opportunity had not come from my hand it would have come from some other hand. I should be much more sorry if you had gone on with that dull slavery which cut you off from all the joys that youth has a right to claim from life. I was mad when I saw your patient drudgery, your blank pleasureless days. I would have done a worse thing than I did to rescue you. And now—well—we must do the best we can for him"—with a reluctant glance at the sleeper. "After all, he is no worse off than many an elderly Crœsus struck down in the midst of his possessions. To this complexion we must all come at last."

Hester answered nothing to his philosophical summing up of the situation. She took her seat by the bedside, watchful, ready to carry out the doctor's instructions, which were of the simplest. There was hardly anything to be done. The old man might awaken from that prolonged slumber in his right mind, or he might not. She could but wait and watch. She had drawn down the blinds, and sat in the subdued light—sat with folded hands, and lips which moved in prayer to that Personal God of whose non-existence her latest studies had assured her. In this hour of agony and self-reproach her thoughts went back into the old paths; and even in the Great Perhaps there was some touch of comfort. Surely somewhere, she told herself, there must exist some Spirit of love and pity, some Universal All-comprehending Mind greater than the mind of man, to which sorrow could make its appeal—in which despair could find a refuge. All the peoples of the earth have felt the necessity for a God. Could this blind groping after the Great Spirit mean nothing, after all? The words of her new teachers—words of power from the pens of men who had thought long and deeply, who had brought culture and pure science to bear upon the problems of life and mind—came back to her in their inflexible assuredness—the words of men who said there was no God, and that the world was none the poorer for the loss of Him—the words of men who said that this life could be full of grace and pleasantness and hope and love, albeit there was no better life beyond, and our beloved dead were verily and for ever dead.

And then words more familiar, words known long before, recurred with a quieting power, like the sound of a melody learnt in childhood, and a gush of tears loosened the iron bands that held her heart, and a ray of hope stole in upon the darkness of her thoughts. "Come unto Me, all ye that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

CHAPTER XXIV.

"ALAS FOR ME, THEN, MY GOOD DAYS ARE DONE."

Life went by with dull and measured pace after that night of terror. Nicholas Davenport recovered consciousness upon awakening from that prolonged slumber, which may have marked the exhaustion following upon long wanderings from village to village, poor food, and unrestful nights in miserable beds. Hester found a rough record of his journeyings in his pockets, in the shape of crumpled tavern bills—the earliest in date a weekly account from the landlord of a little inn at Abingdon. This dated as far back as August, and it was evident the old man had gone to Abingdon almost immediately upon the receipt of Gerard's money, it might be with some dim idea of being near Oxford and the Bodleian, or it might be from some memories of joyous days spent along the river when he was an undergraduate. There were several bills from the Abingdon Inn, spreading over a period of six or seven weeks, and the bills marked a downward progress in the drunkard's career, each successive account showing a larger consumption of alcohol. The last account was not receipted, and it seemed but too likely that the old man had left in debt.

Later bills showed a journey down the river, by land or water. The names of the towns or villages where he had stopped had a rustic sound. the signs of the inns were quaint and old-fashioned. The Ring of Bells. The Old House at Home. The First and Last. But whatever the sign might be, Nicholas Davenport's bill showed that his chief outlay had been for alcohol—brandy in the earlier stages of the journey. Later, when his funds were dwindling, the drink had been gin. The unhappy man had chosen the very worst direction for his fated footsteps, for in those low-lying rural villages by the river he must have found the atmosphere most calculated to bring back those neuralgic agonies which had been first the cause, and afterwards both cause and excuse, for his intemperance. His daughter's care had kept the fiend at a distance, but he had gone in the very way of his old enemy. The last in date of all the bills was a scrawling memorandum from a wayside public-house in the next village to Lowcombe, and hardly two miles from the Rosary. It was doubtless from the fireside gossips of the tap-room that Nicholas Davenport had heard that description of Mr. and Mrs. Hanley and their manner of life which had led him to suspect their identity with Gerard and Hester. And now he was stretched on a sick bed, helpless, the power of movement lost to the long lank limbs: helpless and almost imbecile. The mind was dim and blurred. Memory was gone, save for rare and sudden flashes of recollection, which had about them something strange and unearthly that thrilled his daughter with awe. Some sudden allusion to the past, some sharp, clear, scrap of speech startled and scared her as if the dead had spoken. His imbecility seemed far less unnatural, less painful even, than these transient revivifications of sense and memory.

The nursing sister, a quiet, orderly person between thirty and forty, tall, broad-shouldered, vigorous, and with a hearty appetite for her meals, relieved Hester's watches in the invalid's room; and after the first week a male attendant was engaged, who would be able to assist in getting the patient out of doors, so soon as he should be well enough to be moved into a Bath chair, and wheeled about the gardens and lanes. Mr. Mivor explained to Hester that her father's condition was not so much an illness as a state. He had little hope in any marked recovery, physical or mental. Mr. Davenport's constitution had been destroyed by intemperance, and the surprise, the shock, whatever it was that brought about the seizure of the other night, had only precipitated a crisis that was, in a measure, inevitable.

Hester's colour came and went as she listened to his opinion. She lifted her eyes to the doctor with an imploring look.

"Tell me the truth, Mr. Mivor, the whole truth. Do you really think that what happened the other night has made hardly any difference to my father—that this sad state of things must have come about, even if——"

"Even if there had been no agitating cause—no fall. Yes, I do. But the fall came before the stroke, I think, did it not?"

"Yes, I am sorry to say;" and then in trembling accents she went on, "I am so anxious to know the truth, to know the worst even, that I must tell you all. You have promised to keep our secrets?"

"Yes, yes, be assured that you can trust me."

"I left my home to spend my life with Mr. Hanley—left without my father's knowledge. He was away from our poor lodgings at the time—and I thought that he had deserted me, and I may have cared less on that account, perhaps. But he had not meant to abandon me, I am sure. He had gone away under a misapprehension, and after wandering about the country he found us here—and he was not quite himself, I think, for he spoke to me cruelly—with words which no father——"

She broke down, sobbing out the bitter memory of that night. The worthy doctor soothed her with kindly sympathy. He had seen much of those storms of care and woe, anger and strife, that rage in the households whose outward seeming is peace and pleasantness, and he had a tender heart for the sorrows of his patients, especially for a young and beautiful woman who was expiating the sin of having loved too well, and who was evidently not of the clay of which sinners are made.

"Don't tell me any more," he said; "there were high words—a little bit of a scuffle perhaps, and your father fell. I thought as much when I helped to undress him. I examined him carefully. There were two or three incipient bruises—nothing more. Such a fall would not have produced the seizure. That was the result of gradual decay, the decay of an alcoholised brain. Your father has been the chief sinner against himself."

There was infinite relief in this opinion so far as Gerard was concerned, but it did not lessen the burden of her own remorseful conscience. She blamed herself for this final ruin of the life she had fought so hard to reclaim.

One duty, one atonement, only remained, she thought, and that was to bear her burden, and to make this broken life as happy as she could. Her father knew her, and took pleasure in her companionship. That was much. He accepted his surroundings without inquiry or astonishment, and enjoyed the luxuries that were provided for him without asking whence they came. He saw Gerard without agitation, occasionally recognising him and addressing him by name, at other times greeting him with the distant politeness due to a stranger. And Gerard endured his presence in the house, at first with a sublime patience, even going out of his way to pay the feeble old man little attentions when he met him in the garden or neighbouring lanes on sunny mornings, dragged along in his comfortable Bath chair, wrapped to the chin in fur, with Hester walking at his side. While the scene of that awful night, the fears that had haunted him in the slow hours of waiting for dawn and the doctor, were still fresh in his memory, a touch of pity and remorse made him patient of a presence which could not bring comfort or pleasantness into his retreat; but after a month of this endurance, the incubus began to oppress and annoy him, even although Hester took care that he should see as little as possible of that third inmate of the house, and refrained from worrying him with any details of her father's life, whether he were better or worse, cheerful or depressed. The mere consciousness of the old man's existence became unbearable, and Gerard urged the need of placing him in a sanatorium, where, as he argued, he would be better cared for than in any private home.

Hester was unhesitating in her refusal.

"He could not be happier or better cared for than he is here," she said, "and even if he were as well cared for, which I doubt, I should not know it, and should be miserable about him."

"That is rather a bad look-out for me. And how long is this kind of thing to last?"

"As long as he lives."

"And according to your friend, Mr. Mivor, he may last for years—a wreck, but a living wreck—and in that case he will outlast me. You cannot mean it, Hester. You can't mean to abandon me for—this unlucky old man?"

"Abandon you! Gerard, how could you think it?"

"But I must think it. No one can serve two masters. If you insist upon staying here to nurse your father, you can't go to the South with me, and what becomes of our winter in Italy?"

"I have been thinking of that," she said, with a troubled look. "But is it really necessary for you to go to the South? The weather has been so mild."

"It generally is before Christmas. Winter doesn't begin to show his teeth till January."

"And you have been so well."

"Not well enough to face five months' cold weather, or to disobey my doctor. He told me to winter in the South."

Hester sighed, and was silent for a few moments. Oh, that dream of the lovely South, how sweet it had been, how fondly she had dwelt upon Browning's Italian poems, upon all those word-pictures of mountain and olive wood, cypress and aloe; the hill-side chapel, the mule path, the straggling town upon the mountain ridge, the vine-shadowed *berceau*, the sapphire lake! And she had to renounce this fair dream; and, infinitely worse, she had to part from Gerard. If he must go to the South, they must be parted.

"I would give up anything rather than leave my father," she said quietly. "I think you must know how I have looked forward to seeing that lovely South, the countries that seem a kind of dreamland when one thinks of them in our prosaic world, and seeing them with you—with you! But if you must go, you must go alone. You will come back to me, won't you, dear? The parting won't be for ever?"

"I shall come back—yes, of course, if I live; but it will be hideously dreary for you here all the winter. Surely you could trust your father to the nurse and his man. They are very kind to him, aren't they?"

"Yes, they are kind, and I am here to see that they are kind. How do I know what would happen if I were away? He is very trying sometimes. They might lose patience with him."

"A sharp word would not hurt him once in a way. They would have to be kind to him in the main. His existence means bread and cheese for them, and it would be to their interest to make him comfortable."

"That would not absolve me from my duty, Gerard. No; I must stay with him till the end."

"Well, you must do as you please. If you find this place too dismal or too damp you can take your invalid to Hastings or Torquay. He could travel as far as that, I suppose?"

"I don't think so. Mr. Mivor said that any fatigue or excitement might be dangerous. He is to be kept as quiet as possible, and this place suits him admirably."

"And he suits Mivor as a patient."

"That's a very unfair insinuation, Gerard. Mr. Mivor might come to see him every day, yet he only comes once in ten days. He told me the other day that he would not come again unless he were sent for; but urged him to come occasionally just to see that no neglect was arising."

"I don't grudge Mivor his fees. I only lament the change that has come into our life—the life we were to lead together;" and then, touched by the sadness in Hester's face, he went on, "After all, if the winter were very mild, I might rub on here, perhaps."

"No, no," she cried eagerly, "you must run no risk. Oh, Gerard, surely you know how precious your life is to me—dearer than any other life. You must know that it is duty that keeps me here—that love would have me always by your side."

"I know that you have all the obstinate clinging to unthankful duties which is a characteristic of your sex," he said; "or perhaps I ought to say a characteristic of good women. The bad ones throw their caps over the mill, laugh duty to scorn, and, I believe, get the best out of life. Theirs is the Esau's portion, the savoury mess that they long for, the pleasure that comes at the nick of time. After all, I think that is the best."

He was lying back in his low *bergère* beside the drawing-room fire, his arms flung up above his head, his eyes gazing dreamily at the flaming logs, in that brief half-hour when the cold, pale winter day melts into darkness. He was very fond of Hester still, perfectly contented in her society; but he had begun to think of other things when he was with her, and he hated that presence of the old man and his attendants upstairs. One of the rooms that Davenport occupied was over the drawing-room, and Gerard could hear footsteps crossing the floor now and then, the male attendant's heavy tread, the nursing sister's lighter footfall, and at seven o'clock every evening the wheels of the invalid-chair drawn slowly across the room. He knew the automatic routine of that sad life, the hour at which the patient was dressed, his meals, his airing, the business of getting him to bed, which happened before Hester and Gerard sat down to dinner. He knew all these details, though Hester had talked of the patient so little—knew them by their monotonous recurrence. He considered what he should do with himself in the winter, how make life most pleasant to himself now that the spell which had bound him to the Rosary was broken? He had been warned against all excitement. The feverish life of the dissipated idler was not for him. The utmost that he could allow himself in the way of relaxation would be the society of clever people, and a little quiet dinner-giving in his fine London house. He could oscillate between London and the Rosary, and Hester need feel no sense of desertion. The winter season had begun; there would be plenty of pleasant people in London. His sister was to be married in the first week of the new year, and he would have to be in Devonshire for that occasion. His mother had written to him several times since her return from the Continent, urging him to go and see her, full of vague uneasiness about the life he was leading.

"If Hester owes a duty to her father, I have my obligation to my people," he said to himself, in that long reverie by the fireside. "I have to consider the claims of those who have never brought disgrace upon me as that old sot has done upon her."

"What are you thinking of so earnestly, Gerard?" Hester asked presently, watching his face in the fitful light.

"I am thinking of my mother."

The answer chilled her. His mother; yes, he, too, had those who were near and dear to him—those in whose lives she had no part.

"Your mother. Ah, how kind she was to me, and what ages ago that old life seems! Shall I ever see her again, I wonder?" she speculated, with a sigh.

And then came the bitter thought: What could his mother think of her? Disgraced, dishonoured, nameless; an outcast in the sight of such a woman as the Rector's wife. She did not reckon upon a good woman's Christian charity. She thought of the Rector's wife only as of one who had never been touched by sin, and who could make no allowances.

"Your sister is to be married very soon, I suppose?" she said interrogatively, after a long pause.

"In the first week of the year. I shall have to be at the wedding."

"Of course. My heart will go with you, and all my warmest wishes for her happiness—even though she and I may never meet again."

"Don't harp upon that string, Hester. Let the future take care of itself. You are getting morbid in this odious house."

"Odious! Oh, Gerard, we have been so happy here; I thought you loved this house."

"So I did, while it was full of sunshine and flowers, and before you turned it into a hospital. Don't let us quarrel, Hester. I'm a little hipped, and I shall be saying disagreeable things without meaning them. You have reminded me of my sister's wedding, and that I have not even thought of a wedding present. What shall I give her?"

"Something very handsome, of course; but I know how charitable she is, and that she would rather have something for the poor people in her new parish."

"She shall have anything she likes for her poor; but she must have something which she can look at by-and-by as her brother's gift. Cheques are the most fashionable offerings from rich relatives, so I shall give her a cheque; but there must be something else—a service of plate, I think, will be best. She and Cumberland would never have the heart to buy silver for themselves. He would say, 'It should be melted down and given to the poor;' but Lilian will not have my gifts melted down. I will go up to town to-morrow and choose the service—fine old Georgian plate such as will not seem an anachronism in their old Georgian house. I know even Cumberland has one small vanity. He wants everything in his house to be of the same period as the building itself."

Gerard went to London on the following morning, and for the first time since he had lived at the Rosary, told Hester not to expect his return that evening.

"I may be in London for two or three days," he said. "I have a good deal to do there."

She made no murmur. She saw him off at the gate with a smile, standing waving her hand to him in the winter sunlight, and then she went slowly back to the house with an aching heart.

"'Alas for me, then, my good days are done!'" she sighed, quoting her favourite Elaine.

CHAPTER XXV.

"HOW COULD IT END IN ANY OTHER WAY?"

The winter was mild, one of those moist and gentle seasons which delight the heart of the sportsman, but which all the sanitarians and ultra sensible people declare to be unhealthy, preaching their little sermon about want of aëration, and so on. Gerard was not one of these. He hated frost and snow, London snow most of all; and he was glad of a winter which did not oblige him to leave Hester for any length of time. He did not want to spend all his days at the Rosary. She had made that once delightful retreat in somewise a horror to him; but he loved her still, and he shrank from any act that might seem like desertion. When the year of Mrs. Champion's widowhood was over he would have to face his difficulty, and settle with himself and with his first and second love as to what his life was to be. By that time Nicholas Davenport might be peacefully at rest, and the chief impediment to his marriage with Hester removed. In the meantime Hester was to him in all things as dear and as honoured as if she had been bound to him by the strongest tie the law can forge—not a very strong tie, it must be admitted, nowadays. He stayed in town for about ten days, choosing his sister's wedding present, and seeing all the town had to show him in the way of dramatic talent. He gave a couple of his famous breakfasts during those ten days, and Hillersdon House was put in working order, his staff of servants revised and corrected, and every detail of his luxurious surroundings carefully supervised. Valet and butler were told that their master would winter in England, mostly in London. Valet and butler were fully aware that their master had another establishment; but he had so far been cleverer than the average master in keeping the secret of the second home. No one knew where he went when he left Hillersdon House. He who was so amply furnished with carriages always went to the station in a hansom.

He spent Christmas at the Rosary, three days of quietness and contentment, which were a relief after the breakfasts, the copious talk, the picture galleries and theatres, the scandals, and perpetual movement of London. He would have been quite happy but for the uncomfortable consciousness of Nicholas Davenport's presence in the room above—an existence which he could never contemplate without vague pangs of remorse, lest this death in life were indeed his work, lest it had been that blow of his which shattered the feeble intellect. Hester told him what Mr. Mivor had said about the inevitableness of the attack; but this one opinion was not enough for comfort. Another doctor and a better doctor might have told a different story.

Hester tried to be happy in those brief days of holiday; but the old unquestioning happiness, the joy that looked neither before nor after, was gone. The perfect union was broken. The ring which symbolises eternity was snapped into mere segments of life which she must accept with thankfulness. It was much that her lover had not deserted her. All the stories that she had ever read went to prove that desertion was the inevitable end of forbidden bliss such as she had tasted. He had shown her that he could live happily for more than a week apart from her, but there was yet no hint of desertion; and he had done much in deferring his journey to Devonshire till after Christmas.

He left her on a mild and sunny morning, looking far better than on his arrival at the cottage. Those few quiet days had rested him after the high living and keen contest of malicious wit which constituted London society, or that section of it in which he moved.

Hester and he had walked in the wintry woods together, and enjoyed the balmy air of pine thickets, and the soft carpet of fallen leaves, with all the winter charm of chastened colouring under grey skies. He told her at parting that he had been very happy.

"If you could only have given me a little more of your time it would have been better," he said. "You are so severe in your recognition of a divided duty. Forgive me, love," he added hastily, seeing her look of distress. "You are all goodness, and I am a wretch to murmur. I will write to you after the wedding."

"Oh, sooner than that, Gerard; that would mean quite a week to wait!"

"Well, then, sooner. But you know what a bad correspondent I am. I think volumes about her I love, but my lazy pen refuses to write a single page."

He was gone, and she went back to the cottage, which had taken a different look since the change in its master's habits. It no longer looked like Gerard's home. It had the air of a house to which a man comes occasionally, and where things hardly bear the stamp of his individuality. The despatch-box was shut; the writing-table showed no litter of scattered papers. The books he read oftenest—Swinburne, Baudelaire, Richepin, Verlaine, Comte, Hartmann, Darwin, Schopenhauer, were all in their places; for these were books which Hester loved not, and she had not disturbed them in his absence. The rooms looked to her like the rooms in a widow's house. There was the absence of litter which marks the absence of man.

She sat by the fire in the study for an hour or more while the invalid was being dressed and got ready for his morning airing, sat thinking of her own life and what she had made of it; a melancholy review, for her conversation with Mr. Gilstone had swept away all sophistry as to her position. She no longer compared herself to Shelley's Mary, no longer believed in the rightfulness of her conduct. She stood convicted in her own eyes as a woman who had sinned. Whether the universe were or were not directed by a thinking mind, she had lost her place among good women. She sat there alone at this Christmas season, when other women were surrounded by friends, and told herself that she had forfeited the right to womanly friendship.

She walked beside her father's chair in the lanes for an hour before the brief winter day began to fade, walked at his side, and talked to him, and pointed out the features of interest in the landscape, the moving life of beast and bird, as she would have done for a child. She listened to his feeble, disconnected talk. She made him understand—as much as it was in his power to understand anything—that he was cherished and cared for.

They did not meet many people in the lanes, but those whom they met took a great deal more notice of the old man in the Bath chair and the pensive face and girlish figure of his companion than Hester supposed. Gentle and simple were interested—the simple with an unalloyed friendliness towards helpless old age and filial duty; the gentle with a touch of pity for the old man, mixed with conflicting opinions about his daughter.

The Curate in his soft felt hat, slouched over his brows as if he had been a brigand, the Misses Glendower, bent on district visiting, Mrs. Donovan driving her self-willed ponies, and crimson with the effort of keeping them under control—all these were keenly observant of Hester, and talked of her with a new zest at afternoon-tea.

This appearance of an invalid father, who, although physically and mentally a wreck, looked liked a gentleman, was calculated to modify the village ideal of Mrs. Hanley's position. That she should have her father to live with her, clad in purple and fine linen, sedulously waited upon, and enthroned in a Bath chair that must have cost as much as the family landau which Lady Isabel had just obtained from the Repository in Baker Street, certainly supplied an element of respectability which the world of Lowcombe had not looked for from Mrs. Hanley. After all, people are not kites, and though they may tear and maul a reputation, they are not altogether without tenderness for the sorrows of life.

"I must say that young woman's attention to her father is one of the most touching things I have seen for a long time," said Mrs. Donovan, "and if I could have stopped my ponies yesterday morning I really think I should have pulled up and introduced myself to her. But there, you all know what my ponies are."

"Yes, Mrs. Donovan, and we all know what your driving is," answered Lady Isabel, who had been a famous whip in her youth, and who, belonging to a house that had always been poor liked to show her contempt for the newly rich.

"I really think some of us ought to call," pursued Mrs. Donovan, ignoring the venomed shaft. "I hear that Mr. Hanley has been a good deal away from home lately."

"Has he? The beginning of the end, I should think. Why don't you call, Mrs. Donovan? You are broader-minded than I am, and you have no daughters. It can't do you any harm to take notice of Mrs. Hanley; and as she doesn't know a soul in the place, she may be glad to make your acquaintance."

"I don't think she could do your daughters any harm, Lady Isabel. She is so much younger than your girls; and she looks the picture of innocence."

"Yes, and I have seen just such pictures in the Burlington Arcade, when I have been to my glover's rather too late in the afternoon," retorted Lady Isabel. "You can please yourself, Mrs. Donovan; but I never visit people whose antecedents I don't know. The fact that this young person behaves nicely to her imbecile father is no evidence of her respectability. Young persons of that class have their feelings as well as we have, and I dare say they are fonder of their own people than we are, knowing themselves shut out of society."

After this Mrs. Donovan gave up all idea of patronising Mrs. Hanley. However she might hug herself with the thought of her investments and dividends, and the power which unlimited cash can give, she knew that she was not strong enough to fly in the face of Lowcombe society. It was for her to follow, and not to lead, if she wanted to be admitted to that inner circle, where the society was not suburban and rich, but county and arrogantly poor. These county people boasted of their dearth in these latter days, as if it were a distinction; since poverty, for the most part, meant land, while wealth not unfrequently meant trade. Mrs. Donovan wanted to stand well with that choice circle which had its ramifications in the Peerage, and talked of Dukes and Duchesses as if they were men and women: so she did not call upon Mrs. Hanley; and thus Hester was spared that favour which would have been the last worst drop in her cup of bitterness.

New Year's Eve is apt to be a saddening season, even in the family circle, for however cheerily we may pretend to take it with carpet dances and hand-shaking, or Pickwickian jovialities in the way of innocent games and strong drinks, there lurks deep in every heart the consciousness of another stage passed in the journey that leads down hill to that inn we all wot of, where there is always room for everybody: and deep in every heart there is the memory of some one whom the year has taken away, and not all Time's years can bring back. But what of New Year's Eve to the lonely girl who sat beside the fire through the long evening, surrounded with the books she loved, but finding scanty solace even in their company!

Such lonely evenings are by no means rare in the lives of wedded wives, at those seasons when the indisputable rights of gun or rod keep the sportsman far away from the home fireside, or when the sacred demands of business constrain the mercantile man to overeat himself in a city hall: but Hester could not forget that she was sitting alone to listen for the ringing of the midnight joy-bells, only because she was an unwedded wife. Had the bond been sanctified her natural place would have been with her husband at Helmsleigh

Rectory on this vigil, which was a memorable one for the Rector's household, since it was the eve of his only daughter's wedding. How natural that she, Lilian's friend, should have been by Lilian's side to-night! How indispensable her presence had she been Lilian's sister-in-law! Tears sprang to her aching eyelids at the humiliating thought that she could now be no more counted worthy to enter that home where she had once been treated almost as a daughter of the house.

She remembered a New Year's Eve spent in that house, ever so many years ago, as it seemed to-night, looking back from a life in which all things were changed, across a dreary interval of misfortune and poverty. She remembered how kind every one had been to her, full of tenderest compassion for her motherless youth, her burden of household cares. How bright and happy the rambling old Rectory had looked, all the sitting-rooms gaily lighted with a miscellaneous collection of lamps and candles; the old-fashioned Christmas decorations of holly and evergreen in hall and dining-room; the friendly evening party, with a good deal of music and a little waltzing, started in an impromptu fashion by the youthful master of the neighbouring hounds; the inevitable recitation from the curate ot an adjoining parish—long, dismal, intended to make people's flesh creep, but only making the aged yawn and the young laugh. She and Lilian had sat together in a corner by the piano, struggling against the tendency to girlish giggling, full of their own small jokes and depreciation of the youth of the neighbourhood, both of them heart-whole and happy—happy as children are, without thought of the morrow.

She had played, fresh from her German master's tuition, full of the Leipsic school and its traditions, had played and had been praised and made much of. Her playing was a thing of the past almost, for in the days of her poverty she had been without a piano, and in her new life she had given up all her hours to being Gerard's companion, and he, who cared little for classical music, had given her no encouragement to regain lost ground by severe practice. The pretty little cottage-piano stood in its corner unopened, and now that it might have been to her as a companion and friend, she feared to play lest the sounds should disturb her father in his rooms on the upper floor.

The night was clear and frosty, but not severely cold, and at midnight she wrapped a thick shawl about her and went out on the lawn, and walked slowly up and down by the starlit river, listening for the bells of Lowcombe Church. They broke out upon the stillness with a sudden burst of sound that thrilled her, like the spontaneous cry of some Titanic soul rejoicing in some great, nameless good to mankind. She could not divide herself from the gladness in that burst of music, as the sounds came pealing along the water. The starlight, the darkness of the opposite woods, the faint ripple of the quiet river, the universal hush of calmest winter night through which the joy-peal broke, were all too much for her sad, remorseful heart. She felt that somewhere beyond this narrow scene of life there must be a home and a refuge for lives such as hers, somewhere a friendship and a pity greater than human pity, which could understand, and pardon, and shelter. If it were not so, the story that church bells, and running rivers, and winds that blow over woodland and mountain, and cathedral organs had been telling was a lying message to mankind, civilised and uncivilised, in all the ages that were gone; and that fond hope deep in the heart of man, barbarian or civilised, bond or free, was the cruellest hallucination that was ever engendered in that automatic instrument which we call mind.

She walked for nearly an hour in the wintry garden, and that quiet commune with Nature, that unconscious absorption of the beauty of the winter landscape gave her much more comfort than she had been able to find in Tennyson or Browning, since even "In Memoriam," which was to her as a second gospel, had failed to-night to wean her from the thought of her own sorrows.

"I wonder if he has remembered me, once, just for one moment, in all this evening?" she asked herself, as she rose from her knees.

Even when most shaken in her old faith by the new learning she had never altogether lost the old habit of prayer. Her prayers might be vague and indistinct, the outpouring of a sorrowful mind, to what God she knew not, but for her prayer was a necessity of life.

She was sitting at her lonely breakfast next morning in Gerard's study, when something happened which cheered her with the knowledge that she was not altogether forgotten.

There came the sound of wheels on the crisp gravel drive, a loud ring at the door, and then the country-bred parlour-maid bounced into the room with an excited air, exclaiming, "If you please, ma'am, here's a brougham!"

"What do you mean, Pearson? It's the doctor, I suppose!"

"No, no, ma'am. It's a new carriage, coachman, and all complete—for you! Here's a letter the coachman brought. I forgot the salver, I was that taken aback;" and the damsel handed a letter.

It was from Gerard.

"DEAREST,—" Since you are to spend the winter in the country you must have a carriage, so I send you a brougham by way of New Year's gift. It has been built specially for country work, and will be none the worse for much service in the rustic lanes you are so fond of. The coachman has admirable testimonials from previous employers, so you may trust him fully as head of your stable. I have told him to engage a stable-help, and to put all things on a proper footing. The horse was bought for me by a man who is a far better judge of the species than I am.

"Be happy, my love, in the beginning of the year, and in many a happy year to come.—Your ever faithful, G. H.

"P.S.—Just starting for Devonshire."

The letter made her almost happy, almost, but not quite, for kind as his words were they gave her no assurance of his love; they did not tell her that his thoughts and his heart's desire would be with her at the beginning of the year, the first year which had begun since they two had loved each other. For him it was much less of an epoch than it was for her, and he had easily reconciled himself to the idea of their separation.

The gift vouched for his kindly thought of her, and was welcome on that account, but she felt that any addition to her luxuries only accentuated the dubiousness of her position.

She went out to look at the brougham, a delightful carriage, small, neat, with dark, subdued colouring, and a perfection of comfort and elegance which in no way appealed to the eye of the casual observer; such a brougham as a leading light of the House of Commons might choose to convey him quickly and quietly to and from the scene of his triumphs, every detail sober, simple, costly only because of its perfection. The horse was a fine up-standing brown, a patrician among horses, carrying his head as if he were proud of it, doing his work as if hardly conscious of doing it, in the fulness of his power; an amiable horse, too, for he stooped his lordly head and gave his velvet nose freely to the caressing touch of Hester's hand.

The coachman was middle-aged, and, to all appearance, the pink of respectability.

"I have only driven from the station, ma'am," he said. "If you'd like to drive this afternoon the horse won't hurt."

"No, no. I'll let him rest to-day, if you please."

"Quite the lady," thought the coachman, as he drove round to his unexplored stables, pleased with a mistress who showed no impatience to be sitting in her new carriage and running her new horse off his legs; evidently a lady to whom a brougham was no novelty.

He had been pleased with his master, who had told him to order whatever was required in the way of stable gear, and to engage a helper, all in the easy way which marks a master who does not look too closely into details.

Hester was comforted by this mark of Gerard's regard. For a millionaire to give such gifts might have but little significance, yet the gift implied thoughtfulness, and it made her happier to know that he had thought of her.

She drove in her new carriage on the following day, drove to Reading and made her little purchases, all as modestly chosen as if she had been the wife of a curate. Gerard had given her a pocket-book stuffed with bank-notes before he left for Devonshire, but no plethora of money could induce her to extravagant expenditure. Her winter gowns, made by a Reading tailor, were of a Quaker-like plainness; her dinner-gown of soft grey silk was the simplest thing in home dinner-gowns. The long seal-skin coat which Gerard had insisted upon ordering for her at the beginning of the winter was the only expensive garment she possessed. Just at this season she had to make purchases which were not for her own use, purchases of finest lawn and softest cambric, and pattern garments of daintiest form, which gave employment to her skilful fingers in the long lonely evenings of that first week in the New Year.

Gerard wrote to her of his sister's wedding in briefest phrases. Must he not also have remembered that had all been well she should have had her place, and an honoured place, at that family gathering, and that there must be a sting in anything he might write of the ceremony and of his people?

"They left for the Land's End, to spend a fortnight in a little inn on the edge of the Atlantic—a curious fancy for a winter honeymoon. I wanted them to go to Naples and Sorrento—of course at my expense—but John Cumberland would not hear of a journey that would keep him away from his parish for more than a fortnight, and my sister's mind is his mind, so they are clambering about upon the rocks, watching the shags and the gulls, and listening to the roaring of the breakers—utterly happy, I believe, in each other's society, as you and I have been beside the dripping fringes of the willows. For my own part, I can hardly imagine a January honeymoon. Love needs sunshine and long summer days."

That last sentence haunted Hester all through the evening, as she bent over her work at her little table in the nook by the fire. Was love ended with a single summer? Could she and Gerard ever renew the happiness of last summer? Alas, no; for last summer he could hardly bear to be absent from her for an hour; and of late he had shown her only too plainly that he could live without her. It was only natural, perhaps. Who but a romantic girl could ever think that any union love ever made could be one long honeymoon? There was no word of returning to the Rosary in Gerard's last letter. His mother insisted on his staying for another week at the Rectory, and he had been unable to refuse her. He hoped that Hester was taking long drives, getting herself plenty of new books at Miss Langley's delightful library, and keeping in good health and spirits. It is so easy for the absent to entertain these hopes.

Hester did not take many drives, though the roads were in good condition, and the coachman came every morning for orders. She preferred her quiet walks beside her father's Bath chair; for these at least left the satisfaction of duty done, and the brougham, with all its elegant luxuriousness, only oppressed her with a keener sense of her position. She felt ashamed of driving past the Lowcombe people in their shabbier carriages, felt almost as if she could hear the hard things they said of her.

She thought often of kindly Mr. Gilstone and his vain endeavour to set things right for her, and she longed for the sound of his friendly voice in her solitude. But she had no hope that he would ever enter the Rosary again. She would have gladly gone to his church on the first Sunday of her solitude, had she been brave enough to face the curious eyes of his congregation; but on the second Sunday she felt so utterly desolate that her heart yearned to the church as the one shelter outside her lonely home where she could enter and feel herself unforbidden, so in the evening she ordered her brougham and drove to Lowcombe, telling her coachman to stop at the entrance to the village, and to wait for her at the same spot when the service was over. She did not want to make herself conspicuous at the lych gate by the flaming lamps of her carriage, or the beauty of her horse. She hoped to creep quietly to a seat in one of the aisles; but it happened that the pew opener was the son of the butcher who served the Rosary, and was eager to pay all possible honour to a good customer. With this intent he conducted her to a seat near the pulpit, the seat of the august Mr. Muschatt himself, a seat cushioned and foot-stooled in purple cloth, where the local landowner sat like Dives, and was reported never to drop more than sixpence into the bag, and only to drop sixpence when he had failed in obtaining a threepenny piece. Here, in the sight of the evening congregation, which included most of the gentilities of Lowcombe, where the evening service was popular, Hester sat in her sealskin coat and neat little sealskin toque and heard the evening lessons, and here she knelt with meekly bent head and joined in the prayers which had once been interwoven with her daily life, but which now had a doubly impressive sound after a silence of half a year; while the old hymn tunes, and most of all the words of that evening hymn she had loved so well—

"Abide with me, fast falls the eventide," moved her almost to tears. Indeed, it was only the consciousness of the lamplight on her face, and perhaps, too, the apprehension of furtive glances from unkind eyes, that nerved her to the effort which restrained her tears.

The Rector's evening sermon was simple and practical, one of those plain-speaking, homely addresses which he loved to give of an evening—sermons in which he spoke to his flock as to a little family with whose needs and sorrows and failings he was familiar. Hester met his glance more than once as she looked up at him, and there were words, comforting words, in his sermon which she fancied were meant especially for her, words to lighten the sinner's despair and to promise the dawn of hope.

She went home happier for that village service, and having once confronted the curious looks of the congregation she determined to go to church regularly. The church was open to sinners as well as saints, to Magdalen as well as to Martha and Mary, to the doubter as well as to the believer; and now that Gerard was no longer by to assail the creed in which she had been reared, with all the pessimist's latest arguments, her heart went back into the old paths, and the Rock of Ages was once again a shelter and a support.

There was a daily service at Lowcombe, and to this service Hester went every morning during Gerard's absence. It was the one break in her life, an hour of quiet prayer and contemplation which tranquillised her mind, and sustained her through the monotonous duties of the day.

Gerard reappeared after more than a fortnight's absence. His native air had not improved his health. He looked haggard and weary, and owned that he had been bored in the family circle.

"My father and mother are model people of their kind," he said, "and everything in their house goes by clockwork; but so does life in a gaol, and I confess that I found the Rectory about as lively as Portland. There was nothing to do, and nothing to think about. If I had been a sportsman I should have been out with the hounds. Rural life provides nothing for men who are not sportsmen. Such malshapen beings are hardly believed in by the rural mind."

Hester saw with poignant grief that after a few days at the Rosary Gerard was as bored as he had been in Devonshire. He did not hint at this weariness, but the signs of ennui were too obvious. He suggested inviting Justin Jermyn, but Hester had grown keenly sensitive of late, and she was so evidently distressed at the mention of Mr. Jermyn, that Gerard did not press the question.

"I feel as if there is a covert sneer in almost every word Mr. Jermyn speaks to me," she said.

"Indeed, my dear child, you wrong him. Jermyn is a laughing philosopher, and holds all things lightly. I envy him that lightness as the happiest gift Nature can bestow. For him, to exist means to be amused. He lives only for the present hour, has a happy knack of utilising his friends, and does not know the meaning of thought or sorrow."

Gerard went to London soon after this little discussion about Jermyn, and was away till the end of the week, and from thenceforward he appeared at the Rosary only for two or three days at a time, coming at shorter or longer intervals, his periods of absence lengthening as London began to fill. In London Jermyn was much with him, his umbra, his second self. Hester discovered this fact from his conversation, in which Jermyn's name continually recurred. He spoke of the man always with the same scornful lightness, as of a man for whom he had no real affection, but the man's society had become a necessity to him.

"Does he live upon me?" he said once, when Hester gently suggested that Mr. Jermyn must be something of a sponge, "well, yes, I suppose he does—upon me among other friends—upon me perhaps more than any other friend. You remember how Lord Bacon used to let servants and followers help themselves to his money, while he sat at his desk and wrote, seemingly unobservant. Bacon could not afford to do that kind of thing—his income wouldn't stand it—but Jermyn is my only follower, and I can afford to let him profit by my existence. He does not sponge or borrow my money. He only wins it. I am fond of piquet, and when we are alone he and I play every night. He is by far the better player, an exceptional player indeed, and I dare say his winnings are good enough to keep him in pocket money—while I hardly feel myself any poorer by what I lose. If you would spend a little more, Hettie, I should be all the better satisfied."

"You are only too generous," she said, with a sigh. "I have everything in the world that I want—and I have been more extravagant lately. Your bank notes seem to slip through my fingers."

"That is what they were meant for. I'll send you another parcel from London to-morrow."

"No, no, please do not. I have plenty of money, nearly three hundred pounds. But are you really going back to town to-morrow?"

"Really, dear. It is a case of necessity. My lungs won't stand this river-side atmosphere. Why don't you think better of my suggestion, Hester, and let me find another home for your father. He could be well provided for, and you would be free to travel with me. Dr. South would think me mad if I were to spend

February and March in the valley of the Thames—and even you would hardly wish me to run so great a risk."

"Even I. Oh, Gerard, as if your life were more precious to any one in this world than it is to me."

"Prove your regard for me, then. Let me arrange at once about your father—there are plenty of respectable households in which he could be placed under medical care—and come to Italy with me."

"No," she sighed, "that is what I should love to do, but I have made up my mind. While my father lives I will do my best to make his life happy. It is the only atonement I can make——"

Her tears finished the sentence. Gerard rose impatiently, and began to walk about the room.

"You can hardly expect me to sacrifice my life to your exaggerated ideas of duty," he said. "The best part of the world is untrodden ground for me, and I live in an age which has minimised the fatigue and difficulty of travelling. A man may go round the world now more easily than he went from London to Paris a hundred years ago, and I have means to make the uttermost expenditure a legitimate outlay. And you would have me wither under such a sky as that"—he pointed to the grey fog that veiled garden and river, and blotted out the opposite shore—"and restrict my movements to jogging backwards and forwards between London and this house."

"I would have you do nothing, Gerard, that you do not like, nothing that can possibly injure your health. If it is best for you to go to the South, go there without an hour's needless delay. I will try to make the best of life while you are away, and you will come back to me in the summer, won't you, Gerard, if you are not tired of me?"

"Tired of you. You know that I am not. Don't I entreat you to go with me? It is only your whims and exaggerated notions I am tired of."

This conversation occurred in February, and it may be that the dull, depressing February weather, the river fog, the Scotch mist, the sodden grass and dripping shrubs, and dark, leafless branches of beech and elm, counted for something in Gerard's angry impatience. He went back to London on the following day, and he talked of starting for Italy, nay, indeed, made all his plans for departure, and then at the last altered his mind and stayed in town.

He reappeared at the Rosary at the end of the week, and it was a shock to him to find Nicholas Davenport installed by the drawing-room fire. There had been a gradual improvement in his condition since Christmas, and the doctor had suggested his being carried downstairs in his invalid chair of an afternoon, thinking that the change of surroundings might have a beneficial influence upon his mental state. His mind had certainly been brighter. He had taken more heed of Hester's presence, and had talked to her rationally, though without memory, frequently repeating the same speeches, and asking the same questions over and over again.

His presence beside the hearth made the house odious to Gerard, who saw in that bent and shrunken form the image of death. He retreated at once to the study, where Hester found him standing beside the fire in a gloomy reverie.

"I had no hope of your coming to-day," she said deprecatingly, "or I would not have had my father brought down to the drawing-room. I'm afraid it hurts you to see him there."

"It does, Hester. The very consciousness of his presence in the house has always been a horror to me. Perhaps it is because my own life hangs upon so thin a thread that I hate to see the image of death—and that living death of imbecility is death's worst form. Sometimes I think I shall die that way myself."

She soothed him, and argued away his fears about himself, and promised that her father's presence should not again be inflicted upon him, come when he might to the Rosary. She would remember her divided duty, and she would take care that the home which he had created should be made happy for him.

"It is your house," she said. "I ought to remember that."

"There is no yours nor mine, Hettie," he answered kindly. "All I possess of this world's gear is at your service; but I am full of fancies, and your father's presence chills my soul."

He had come to the Rosary on Saturday afternoon, meaning to stay till Monday, and then go back to London and reconsider his migration to the South. He had been somewhat disheartened by being told at his club that there was snow in Naples, and that people were leaving Rome in disgust at the Arctic cold. These evil rumours, together with his yearning to see Hester once more, had delayed his departure. He had been feeling very ill all the week, and he told himself he must lose no time in getting to a balmier climate, wherever it was to be found.

He did not return to town on Monday. He was shivering and depressed all through Sunday, to Hester's extreme anxiety, and on Sunday night he yielded to her entreaties, and allowed her to send for Mr. Mivor, who found all the symptoms of lung trouble. The trouble declared itself before Monday night as acute inflammation of the lungs, complicated by a feeble heart; and for three weeks the patient hung between life and death, tenderly and devotedly nursed by Hester, who rested neither night nor day, and accepted only indispensable aid from the hospital nurse who had been sent for at the beginning of the attack. When Gerard was able to go down to the drawing-room as a convalescent, he was hardly whiter or more shadowy-looking than Hester herself. He was not ungrateful. He knew the devotion that had been given to him, knew that in those long nights of pain and semi-delirium one gentle face had always watched beside his bed; yet after the first few days of convalescence an eager desire for change of surroundings took possession of him. That illness, coming upon him suddenly, like the grip of demoniac claws fastening upon lungs and heart, had given him a terrible scare. He had been told that he had not a good life; but not since his childhood had he felt the paralysing power of acute disease. Never perhaps until now had he realised the frailty of the thread which held all he knew of or believed in—this little life and its pleasures. In his new terror he was feverishly eager to get to a better climate, to Italy, to Ceylon, to India, anywhere to escape the bitter treacheries of English weather.

Jermyn came down to see him, at his earnest desire. Jermyn played piquet with him in the long March evenings, and amused him with the news of the town; but even this did not lessen his horror of the house that held Nicholas Davenport, or his ever-present terror of a relapse. He arranged the details of his journey with Jermyn, who knew exactly what kind of weather they were having along the Western Riviera.

"You will find summer by the Mediterranean," he said; "March and April are the most delicious months on that sunny shore. Nature is loveliest there just when all the smart people have left for Paris or London. Leave everything to me and your valet, and all you will have to do when your conscientious little medical man here permits you to move, will be to take your seat in the *train de luxe*. I am going Southward for Easter myself, and I'll be your travelling companion, if you like."

"If I like? I should be miserable alone. You will go as my guest, of course."

"As you please," replied Jermyn, shrugging his shoulders. "One does not stand upon punctilio with a millionaire on a matter of pounds, shillings, and pence. I hope to earn my travelling expenses by being useful to you. Does Mrs. Hanley go with you to the South?"

"No," Gerard answered shortly.

Mr. Jermyn went up to town next day to see Gerard's valet, and to give all instructions for the journey. He came back in time for dinner.

"Mrs. Hanley shuns me," he said, on this second occasion, he and Gerard having dined alone on both evenings. "I hope I have not offended her."

"She likes to be with her father."

"But surely some one told me that the old gentleman goes to bed at eight o'clock. She can hardly be wanted in his room after that hour."

"Perhaps not, but she may like to be there," answered Gerard, and then changed the conversation abruptly. "How is your friend the painter getting on with his house?"

"Admirably. I believe it will be finished in two years, which is only a year and a quarter beyond the time specified. His contract with the builder was for two thousand five hundred, and I fancy, in spite of all his alterations and improvements on the original design, he will get off for six or seven thousand. He finds his boat too cold a residence at this time of year, and he is staying at the Inn, where he puts me up."

"I am sorry we have no room for you here——"

"Don't mention it. I doubt whether Mrs. Hanley would like to have me on the premises even were there half-a-dozen bachelor rooms. I'm afraid I am no favourite of hers. It is a curious thing that while the ladies I meet at the Petunia and the Small Hours are positively devoted to me I am unfortunate in provoking the prejudices of the purely domestic mind—and Mrs. Hanley is so thoroughly domestic."

"She is the most devoted and unselfish of women. Her only faults are virtues in excess," answered Gerard, gravely.

His convalescence lasted a week longer before the village doctor gave him leave to start for the Riviera, where the weather reports were now of the fairest. His illness had been so carefully watched by Mr. Mivor that he had implicit belief in that gentleman's wisdom, and listened without impatience to the counsel which the doctor gave him on his last visit, counsel which in some points echoed Dr. South's advice, given some months earlier.

Illness is apt to be selfish, and in his long illness that self-love which had grown and strengthened ever since the sudden change in his fortune, took a stronger growth, and in the long days of convalescence, weak, depressed, and self-absorbed, he had brooded over Hester's refusal to be his companion in his Southern wanderings, her choice of duty to her father rather than duty to him. Angered by her opposition, he began to doubt even her love, or to count that love a poor and paltry thing; the love that can consider another rather than the beloved one; the love so closely allied with remorse that it almost ceases to be love.

A long letter from Edith Champion, which reached him during his last days at the Rosary, seemed to accentuate Hester's coldness. Edith's letter was glowing with hopeful love. Her year of widowhood was drawing towards its close. June would soon be here, and then, if he still cared for her, their new life might begin. He had never been absent from her thoughts during her exile. The winter had seemed very long, but the dawn of spring meant the dawn of hope.

The letter claimed him, and, in his present mood, he had no desire to dispute that claim. The pale, sweet face which looked at him in mute agony on that last March morning had lost its power to move him.

"You will come back to me, Gerard?" she entreated, clinging to him in a farewell embrace.

"Perhaps! Who knows if I may live long enough to see you and England again? You have made your choice, Hester. The future must take care of itself. In any case your welfare is provided for. I have taken care of all material matters—for you and yours."

That was all. There was no tender allusion to that new obligation which the summer was to bring upon Hester and upon him. His heart was full of a sullen anger against this woman whose sacrifice just stopped short of blind obedience.

Her heart turned to ice at this cold reply. Womanly pride, the pride of a deeply injured woman, rose up against him at this last moment. Her arms dropped from his neck. The wan cheek that had been pressed against his was turned away. She followed him silently into the hall, and stood by in silence while he was being helped on with his fur-lined coat, and saw him step into the snug little brougham, with the dumb, tearless agony of a leaden despair. He looked out of the carriage window and waved her a smiling good-bye. The smile hurt her more than his harshest words could have done.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"SING WHILE HE MAY, MAN HATH NO LONG DELIGHT."

GERARD and his companion started for the South in the *train de luxe* that left Charing Cross early in the forenoon. A sunlit passage across the Channel, a day of cigar-smoking and newspaper-reading, and brief intermittent slumbers, into which they sank, not from sleepiness, but from sheer weariness and vacuity: an evening at piquet, played under the vacillating light of a couple of reading-lamps, while the train rushed southward: and then a long weary night in which the same rushing sound, the same incessant oscillation, mixed itself with every dream, while now and again the sudden thunder of a passing train startled the dreamer with some strange image conjured instantaneously out of the distorted dream-world.

Gerard's spirits had been variable all through the long day and evening, now breaking out into gaiety, anon sinking into gloom. His strongest feeling was a sense of relief. He had escaped from a life that had been gradually growing abhorrent to him. He had escaped from the house of melancholy, from the atmosphere of undying remorse. Most of all, he had escaped from the presence of Nicholas Davenport—that living spectre, the dismal simulacrum of humanity, the perpetual reminder of old age, disease, and death; the mindless automaton whose vicinity made life hideous.

"If duty is more to her than love she must find happiness in doing her duty," he said to himself again and again, while his thoughts set themselves to the rhythmical beat of the engine. "She must find happiness—doing her duty!" With every thud those words repeated themselves.

He had done his duty by her, he told himself. He had given her the option, and she had decided. Her lover or her father? She had chosen to stand by the earlier tie. Obstinately, needlessly, in opposition to all reason, she had sacrificed herself to the father whose only claim upon her love at the best had been a father's name. She had chosen.

Yes, he had done his duty. Hurried although his flight from England had been, eager as he was to plunge into new scenes, to wash the bitter taste of memory out of his mouth with the waters of novelty, he had taken every step necessary to ensure Hester Davenport's material prosperity. His last act before leaving London had been to execute a deed of trust which provided for her. She would be a rich woman all the days of her life—a very rich woman—able to enjoy all that wealth can offer of splendour, luxury, variety, the world's esteem, long after he would be inurned in bronze or marble, a handful of mindless dust. She had known the sharp sting of poverty all through the fairest years of her youth, and would be the better able to appreciate the privileges of wealth. He told himself that he could afford to think of her without one remorseful pang; yet he did not so think in the enforced vacuity of long sleepless hours, cramped, with aching limbs, in his narrow berth. The pathetic face, the imploring eyes, haunted him.

He thought of the infinite consolations of her life—a life not measured, like his miserable existence, within the narrow limits of a year or two. If she was alone now, alone with that sad phantasm of mindless humanity, she would have a new companion before very long—the sweetest, tenderest companion woman's life can know—the child who in every attribute recalls all that was best and dearest in the father.

"If I had stayed with her to the end our parting must have come all the same," he told himself, "and why should I sacrifice my poor remnant of life to the horror of an association that agonises me?

One little year, perhaps, at the best. Only a year. Am I a wretch because I try to make the most of that last year?"

He looked at Justin Jermyn, sleeping on the other side of the carriage, the image of placid repose; his breathing as regular as an infant's; his complexion delicately fair in the lamplight; his parted lips rosy as the lips of a child.

"*There* is enjoyment of life," mused Gerard, "and yet I don't believe that man ever had an unselfish thought, or would hesitate at the commission of the darkest crime, if crime could make life pleasanter to him."

He remembered how Jermyn had pushed him on to his alliance with Hester, and how Jermyn had urged him to sever the tie directly it became irksome—a man who perhaps had done very little evil on his own account, who had neither robbed the widow and orphan nor murdered his friend, but who went about the world giving evil advice lightly, with a graceful carelessness, a perpetual happy-go-lucky air which minimised the wrongfulness in every transaction, and made so airy a jest of virtue that vice seemed non-existent. And, after all, when a man has filed down his beliefs to absolute materialism, when he says of that microcosm, himself, "Thou art as the beasts that perish," it becomes very hard to define vice and virtue.

In the grey dawn Gerard envied his Mentor that childlike slumber, that perfect complacency and content with life. And then what physical advantages the man had! Lungs sound as a bell; muscles which no exercise could tire—on the river, in the gymnasium, on tennis-court or golf-links alike inimitable. Yes, that was the glory of life—a mind without sense of good and evil; a body endowed with health and strength, and with the promise of long life in every organ and every limb. Better than millions; better than that plethora of gold which seemed a mockery to the man whose days were numbered.

Gerard pondered on the months that he had wasted in the cottage by the river, living as a man might live whose income was under a thousand a year; he who had the spending of nearly a hundred thousand in the twelve months if he chose; he whose duty it was, knowing himself doomed to early death, to riot in gold, to wallow in the waters of Pactolus, to melt pearls of price in his wine, to achieve some mad extravagance—some folly which should be remembered when he was dust—almost every day of his life.

For fame he had done nothing. Granted that he had furnished a house which in every detail testified to lavish expenditure and superior taste; but do not the wool-growers of Australia and the petroleum merchants of America as much as that? Clever as he fancied himself, he had made no new departure. He had given *recherché* luncheons, and had succeeded in having his hospitality spoken of as "the Hillersdon *table d'hôte*" by the witlings of his circle, mostly, perhaps, by those whom he did not entertain. He had bought some of the costliest books from famous collections lately brought to the hammer. He had patronised some rising artists, eccentrics of the French and Belgian schools; had bought statues, and had given exorbitant sums for carriage horses which he rarely used, and for a Park hack which he rode so seldom that every ride had been a narrow escape of sudden death. And in works of beneficence—what was the record there? He had given freely, given carelessly and unquestioningly, given to all who asked, tossing the letters of appeal from Charities or from individuals to his secretary, with the order to send a cheque "for whatever you think fit." It may be that gold distributed thus unthinkingly had done as much harm as it had done good, had fed the professional begging-letter writer, and encouraged the drunken hanger-on of Fortune. He had devoted his wealth to no great work for the public good. He had dedicated no recreation-ground, no park or lawn, to the joyless dwellers in the seething slums. He had built no wholesome and airy habitations to replace the loathsome dens of Bethnal Green or Bermondsey. No; he had done very little with his money; he, who when penniless had pondered so often on the potentialities of wealth, and had wondered at the sorry use the average millionaire makes of his golden opportunities! He, Gerard Hillersdon, man of the world, thinker, dreamer, fully abreast with all the newest ideas, felt that his career up to this point had been a failure. And the time that remained to him for achievement was so short! He was oppressed by a sense of hurry, an eagerness to enjoy, which kept his blood at fever-point. How slow was this so-called express: how uncomfortable this *train de luxe!*

While the glamour of a passionate love had lasted that tranquil existence by the river had been perfect happiness; but now, by a strange perversity of mind, he looked back upon the placid monotony of those days with a feeling that was akin to disgust. It was not that he could contemplate Hester's image without tenderness; but between the fair young face and his picture of the Rosary there came an image of horror—the face and form of the man whose shattered brain was in some wise his work. He forgot all that he had enjoyed of exquisite bliss—the dual joys of a supreme and unselfish love—in the nearer memory of that one hideous night, in the painful associations of that after time when Hester's heart had been divided between love and duty.

No train could travel fast enough to carry him away from those memories. They were at Monte Carlo in the golden light of afternoon. Only yesterday they had breakfasted at the London Métropole in the grey gloom of an English March. To-day they were taking afternoon-tea on a wide balcony overlooking the sunlit Mediterranean, Monaco's promontory with its twin towers, and all the theatrical gardens and turrets, stucco pinnacles, flower-decked terraces, steps and balustrades of Monte Carlo.

They were to stay here for a few days, as long as the place amused them, and then they were to go to Florence, rapidly or by easy stages, as the spirit moved them. Jermyn's spirits were too equable to be brightened by the change from London greyness to this fairy-land of Europe, but he flung back his head with a gay laugh and sniffed the balmy air with sensuous appreciation.

"What a sensible man your doctor was to send you to the South," he exclaimed, "and what a sensible man you were to invite me to be your travelling companion!"

"I should have been bored to death if I had come alone," answered Gerard laughingly, "and I really think you are the one man whose society suits me best—though I have the most despicable opinion of your morals."

"My dear Hillersdon, I never set up for having any morals. I don't know what morals mean. There are certain things that I wouldn't do, because no man can do them and hold his head up in society. I wouldn't cheat at cards, for instance, or open another man's letter. Between men there is a kind of honesty which must be observed, or society couldn't hold together. Between men and women: well, I think you must have found out long before you met me that the weaker sex is outside the laws of honour, and that a man who would rather perish than *sauter la coupe* at whist or introduce an extraneous king at écarté thinks it a bagatelle to trick a woman out of her reputation. Yet, after all, in the net result of life I believe women have the best of it; and for every one whom we lead astray there are two who fatten upon our destruction, a fact which you may see exemplified in this charming place."

They were at a brand new hotel, a white walled palace built on a height commanding sea and shore. La Condamine lay in a sunny hollow below them, a concatenation of white villas and red roofs and narrow gardens, balconies and trellises brimming over with roses, the rich purple masses of the Bougainvilliers conspicuous above wall and gable, hedges of pink and scarlet geranium, an avalanche of azaleas pouring down the hill to the lapis blue of the sea. The hotel was so new that it seemed to have been built and furnished expressly for Mr. Hillersdon's occupation. The courtly manager assured him that the suite of rooms reserved for him had never been inhabited. They were on the second floor, and consisted of ante-room, saloon, and dining-room, bedrooms and bathroom, all upholstered in the same silvery greys and greens, with artistic touches of warmer colour here and there, to accentuate the prevailing coolness. A marble loggia extended the whole length of the windows, and in this balmy climate the loggia was the most delightful spot in which to live.

Gerard and his companion strolled down to the casino after their eight-o'clock dinner. The season was nearly over, and there was ample space for moving about in the gaudy mauresque rooms, but the players gathered thickly round the tables, under the vivid light concentrated on the green cloth; and there were plenty of people in the trente et quarante room, a higher class perhaps than are to be found in the height of the season, when the idle and the curious surge in and out and peer and watch and whisper, to the annoyance of the players who mean business and nothing else.

For Gerard since his accession to fortune play had but little charm. While he was still poor he had hankered after the feverish delights of the baccarat table, and had frequented clubs where play ran high, venturing small stakes, which when smallest were more than he could afford to lose—but now that loss or gain signified nothing to him he needed some stimulus from without to give a flavour to play.

He found that stimulus for the moment in the very atmosphere of the trente et quarante room, where some of the handsomest women and some of the quickest witted men in Paris crowded round the tables and elbowed him as he leant forward to deposit his stakes. He played very carelessly, sometimes letting his winnings lie on the table till they were trebled and quadrupled before the inexorable rake swept them away, sometimes putting aside his gains in a little heap of gold and notes. which some of those lovely Parisian eyes watched covetously. He was more interested in the people at the table than in the game. It surprised him to see how many of these people exchanged greetings with Justin Jermyn, who had elbowed his way to the front, and was playing with small stakes in a light casual way. His careless nods, his sharp sudden handshakes indicated considerable intimacy with those of the players by whom he was greeted. The beautiful women smiled at him with an air of patronage, and he was equally patronising to the keen-eyed men. A little ripple of low laughter. a flutter of whispers went round the table, quieted only by the authoritative hush of the dealer.

Gerard, after playing languidly for half an hour, pocketed his little heap of gold—the notes having been swept away by the inexorable rake, and gave himself up to observation of the players. How beautiful some of those faces were—and most of them how wicked! Here the bright black eyes and tilted nose of the soubrette type, there a Roman profile, with eyes and hair like Erebus, and there again a Saxon beauty with milky skin, pale eyes, and yellow hair. They all hailed from Paris these syrens, Lutetia being the paradise and happy hunting-ground of their kind; but they were of various nationalities, including a hard-eyed and hard-headed Englishwoman, with a plain face and a perfect figure, in a close-fitting tailor gown, severe and uncompromising amongst the sumptuous demi-toilettes of sister syrens. This lady was reputed to be richer than any other of the feminine gamesters, and was further reported to have refused her hand in marriage to a British Duke. But there was one face at the trente et quarante table which interested Gerard Hillersdon more than all this cosmopolitan beauty, the one only face which wore the typical expression of the gambler, a face haggard with intensity, pinched and worn with inward fever. It was the face of a small elderly woman, who sat at the end of the table near the dealer, and who from time to time consulted a perforated card, upon which she marked the progress of the game; a small face, with delicate aquiline features, thin lips, silvered hair, and dark eyes that seemed too large for the pinched face. There was that in the careless attire, the shabby little black lace hat, of a fashion of four or five years ago, the Spanish lace shawl hanging in slovenly folds over one shoulder, ragged and rusty with long wear, the greasy black silk gown, which told of womanhood that had done with womanly graces, and had sacrificed to one darling vice all the small follies, caprices, and extravagances of the sex. Gerard became more interested in this one player than in the fortunes of the table, so absorbed indeed that Jermyn had to touch his shoulder twice before he could attract his attention.

"It is close upon eleven o'clock," said Jermyn, "and the rooms shut at eleven. What are we to do with the rest of the evening? There are plenty of people here whom I know. Shall I invite a few of them, the most amusing, to your rooms?"

"By all means. Ask them to supper. Let us make believe that the world is nearly two centuries younger, that we are living in the Regency, and that Philip of Orleans is our boon companion. Your follies cannot be too foolish nor your dissipation too wild for my humour. Let this Rock be our Brocken, and invite all the handsome witches of your acquaintance."

"What! even the poor pretty girl with the red mouse in her mouth? And Marguerite; what of Marguerite?"

Gerard winced at the allusion.

"My Marguerite has chosen her destiny," he said. "If she were like Goethe's Gretchen she would have chosen differently. Love would have been all in all with her."

Gerard strolled out of the rooms alone, while Jermyn passed quickly and quietly from group to group and briefly whispered his invitations, which were accepted with a nod or a smile. The people to whom these invitations were given belonged to a class which might adopt the motto of a certain great border clan for their own: *Je suis prêt!* Always ready for the chances of the moment, always ready to be entertained at anybody else's expense, be the entertainer a Watts or a Pullinger, ripe for Portland, or a typical vulgarian of the Hibernian-American type; always ready for ortolans and champagne, for turtle and whitebait, for a saturnalia on a house-boat at Henley, or an orgie at the Continental. Always ready: ready as the vultures are ready, for dead hero or dead dog, when the scent of the carrion is wafted to them from afar off on the wings of the wind.

Gerard strolled slowly, very slowly, up the hill to the big brand new caravansary where the electric light gave something of that elfin brilliancy which suggests the halls of Eblis. Slowly as he walked up that brief ascent, carefully graduated by artful windings for the footsteps of the weak-lunged, he was breathless when he arrived in the vestibule, and had to rest for a few minutes before he could give his orders to the manager.

"A supper—all that there is of the best—for, say, a party of twenty. Do all you can in fifteen minutes. You can give us those little green oysters, and plenty of them. Chateau Yquem, Clos Vougeot. For champagne, well, Heidsec or G. H. Mumm—but I leave the details to you and my friend Mr. Jermyn. Be sure there are lights and flowers in the loggia. And if you can get us any music worth hearing so much the better."

"There are the Neapolitan singers, monsieur; I dare say we can find them."

"*Funicoli, funicola*, I suppose. *C'est connu*, but it will be better than nothing."

Before the stroke of midnight he was sitting at a supper table crowded with roses and azaleas, stephanotis and lilies of the valley, and surrounded with the fine flower of the Parisian demi-monde. What a fairy ring of bright eyes and jewels as dazzling, of eccentric and exquisite toilettes, the very newest colours in fashion's ever-changing rainbow; a general abandonment to the delight of the hour; not vicious—for even sinners are not always bent on sin—but unrestrained! What light laughter; what frank, joyous jesting; airy sentences which in that particular environment sounded like epigrams, but which would seem witless in print; lightest talk of the Paris theatres, the dramas that had succeeded, Heaven knows why, the brilliant comedies which had gone out in the foul smoke of ridicule, failure, and disappointment; the intrigues in the great world and the half-world; the undiscovered crimes; the impending disasters! These careless speakers discussed everything, and decided everything, from dynasties to dressmakers.

Gerard Hillersdon relished that light touch-and-go of the Celtic intellect, trained to folly, but folly spiced with wit. He had tried pleasure in London, and had found it dull and dreary. The ladies he met at the Small Hours were mostly so intent upon being ladies that they forgot to be amusing. The days were past of that fair *mauvaise-langue* who charmed the peerage, and whose sturdy British bon-mots were circulated over civilised Europe, plagiarised in Paris, and appropriated in Vienna. He had sought wild gaiety, and he had found decent dulness. Here, the spirit of fun was not wanting, and the joyous laughter of his guests was loud enough to drown the voices of the Neapolitans in the loggia, yea, even the twanging of their guitars. And by-and-by the Neapolitans were pushed into a corner, and bidden to twang only waltzes, and those loveliest women in Paris were revolving in rhythmical movement in the arms of the keen, clever men, of no particular profession, who constituted their travelling body-guard. Gerard took two or three turns with a lovely German girl, with a creamy complexion and innocent blue eyes, who had done little more than smile sweetly upon the contest of wit and animal spirits, and who was said to have *rincé* (Anglice, beggared) one of the wealthiest Jew bankers of Frankfort.

He could not stand more than those two or three gentle turns to a slow three-time waltz, and he sat in the loggia breathless and exhausted, while the fair Löttchen tripped away to her friends and told them that it was finished with yonder crétin, who would very soon find his way to the Boulanger.

"*En attendant*, he has given us a capital supper," replied a lady who was called Madme. la Marquise in society, but plain Jeannette Foy in all legal documents. "I hope he will leave us money for mourning. *Moi, je me trouve ravissante en noir!*"

Gerard enjoyed the restful solitude of the loggia for half an hour, the fun within having waxed fast and furious, and his guests being somewhat oblivious of his existence. Yes, it was a wild whirl of mirthful abandonment which verily suggested the witches' dance upon the haunted hills. There were little spurts of malignity now and again from the lips of beauty, which were like the red mouse that dropped out of the rosy girlish mouth. Gerard watched this pandemonium from the cool seclusion of the loggia, while the Neapolitans played languidly, and even dozed over their guitars, with an occasional automatic twang. Yes, it was like a witches' Sabbath, or like a dance of wicked spirits in the halls of Eblis Thank Heaven, in that gaudy, many-coloured crowd, amidst the flashing of diamonds and waving of plumed fans, and flutter of silk and lace, there was no ghastly warning vision of his absent love, that Hester whom he had loved so fondly and left so heartlessly.

He pictured her in the wind-swept garden by the river, where the March skies were grey and gloomy, and the hyacinths were shivering in the nipping air. Why was she not with him here? Why was she not sitting by his side, they two alone, looking out over the sleeping town, the colony of white villas in the crescent-shaped hollow, the old, old steep-roofed houses and twin-towered cathedral, yonder on the jutting rock? Why were they not together in the starshine of the balmy night; here, as they had been on the starlit river last year, all in all to each other, knowing no duty, no religion, no law but to adore each other? It was her own fault that they were parted. Had she been with him, these ribald revellers would not have been there. He would have found enough happiness in her sweet society. He had never changed to her. It was she who had changed to him.

He was glad to have escaped from that atmosphere of remorse, glad to be on his way to his first love, glad most of all to be in this fairer world, by the side of the sea of deathless memories, glad to be under these brighter stars. Even folly was pleasant to him as a relief from too much thought. When his new acquaintances of the night remembered his existence so far as to come out into the loggia to take leave, in the faint roseate glow of approaching day, he invited the fairest and wittiest among them to breakfast with him.

"Not to-morrow, but to-day," he said; "Jermyn must devise new pleasures for us—picnics, excursions, by sea or mountain. I mean my brief stay here to be all holiday—if you will help me."

He held the fair Bavarian's hand in his, while the bright black eyes and white teeth of the pug-nosed Comtesse Rigolboche smiled down upon him.

"I had booked my place in the *train de luxe* for to-morrow," said Rigolboche, "but I'll change the date, and stay here as long as you do. We'll all help you to conjugate the verb *rigoler*. *Rigolons*, *rigolez*."

The other voices took up the word, and the revellers departed to a chorus of "Rigolons, rigolez."

Mr. Jermyn was equal to the occasion. He ordered *dejeuners* and dinners. He elicited the talents of the *chef*, he taxed the resources of the well-found hotel. He kept the telegraph wires employed between Monte Carlo and Nice, Marseilles, and Paris, and choicest dainties were expressed along the line. Alternating with messages that involved life and health, fortune, all that is gravest in the destiny of man, flew orders for Perigord pies or monster lobsters, Chasselas grapes, Alpine strawberries, oysters, ortolans, quails. Everything Jermyn touched was successful, and that week at Monte Carlo was a triumph of gourmandise and wild amusement. The hills echoed with the songs of the revellers; the sea waves danced to the music of their laughter as they sailed round the point of Rocque Brune, or lay becalmed in the sheltered Gulf of Ospedaletti. The weather was exquisite — that perfect atmosphere of spring-time on the Riviera which makes one forget that those lovely shores have ever been visited by mistral and sirocco, rain and sleet. It was earthquake weather, Justin Jermyn said, remembering how fair had been that February which was startled by an appalling shock of earthquake. He told them that this glad, beautiful shore was preparing itself for just such another convulsion, but the joyous band laughed him to scorn.

"If a great pit were to open in this mountain and swallow us all alive I should not care," said Rigolboche, emptying her glass with a piquant turn of her wrist and small neat hand. "*J'ai vecu.* I have lived my life."

Hillersdon sighed. How lightly this woman thought of life, while he counted each vanishing hour, and clung with longing desire to the remnant of his days, and could not resign himself to the inevitable end, could not bring himself to say, "I have lived, and am content to die."

Löttchen, the Bavarian girl, had attached herself to him with devotion since that first waltz when she had spoken of him with such brutal scorn. She had gone from scorn to pity, and pity had deepened into love. In all their revellings she tried to be near him, hung upon his footsteps, sought his society. Her soft, clinging ways touched his heart, but that heart was cold to all her charms. She was no more to him than a pretty child by the roadside, holding up a handful of flowers as his carriage drove by.

Rigolboche, too, the reckless and brilliant Rigolboche, who spent more money and who owed more than any lady of her set, tried all the keenest weapons of her wit upon the *deux-fois* millionaire—*des millions sterling, bien entendu*—but the wit of the Parisienne had no more power to fascinate Gerard Hillersdon than the blonde loveliness of the Bavarian. It may be that he had outlived the power of loving; that in his intensified anxiety for his own life all other personalities had become indifferent. If he was looking forward eagerly to reunion with Edith Champion it was because to that reunion he hoped to recover the freshness of his vanished youth, to become once again hopeful and full of energy, as in the days that were gone.

The spirits which Jermyn had assembled served to amuse the man who felt himself doomed, and that was much. That circle of bright faces shut out the dark images which were wont to press round him when he was alone. That festal companionship made thought impossible; and when the night of revelry ended, mostly on the edge of day, Gerard Hillersdon was so thoroughly wearied that he slept more soundly than he had done for a long time.

There was pleasure, too, in the knowledge that he was spending his money. The more lavish the entertainment, the more extravagant the feast, the better was he pleased. Rarely had the boatmen of la Condamine fared as they fared with him. It was his delight to see them rioting on the surplus of the banquet, devouring quails at a mouthful, swilling the costliest wines, digging their rude clasp-knives into pies that had come by express train from Chevet. He flung gold pieces about with the lavish bounty of an Indian Rajah. The waiters at the hotel fawned upon him as if he had been an emperor; the manager addressed him in hushed accents as if he had been a god.

He spent an hour at the rooms every evening. He liked to see his syrens play, and he supplied them with the funds for their ventures at the trente et quarante tables. For his own part he played no more after the first evening. The game did not interest him, but the players did. So he moved about quietly, or stood in the background, and watched the faces in the lamplight.

The little elderly woman with the dark haggard eyes was generally in the same place near the dealer, her bonnet always badly put on and carelessly tied, her lean, ungloved hands not conspicuously clean. Gerard derived a sinister pleasure from his observations of this woman. She was a study in morbid anatomy. All the forces of her being were concentrated upon the card-table. There were nights when she was radiant, glorified, as if some supernal lamp were burning behind the dull olive complexion, and flashing through the dark Italian eyes. There were other nights when her face had a marble fixity, which would have been like death had not the unceasing movement of the anxious eyes made that marble mask more awful than death. Gerard found after a time that this woman was conscious of being observed, that, in spite of the concentration of all her faculties upon the gaming table, she had a restlessness under scrutiny, a nervous apprehension which showed itself from time to time in birdlike glances in his direction, or in an angry movement of the head or shoulders. He tried, perceiving this, to disguise his interest, and watched her furtively, hoping to escape observation. He had noted that on the thin black cord on which her *pince-nez* hung she had one of those horn-shaped corals which the Italian peasant deems a charm against the evil eye, and he had noted how as he passed near her on two or three occasions she had clutched this talisman in her skinny fingers, automatically, as if moved by an instinct of self-defence.

It was his last night at Monte Carlo, and the eve of a water picnic which was to signalise his departure, and was to be the bouquet in the series of entertainments organised by Justin Jermyn. He had spent half an hour at a jeweller's on the hill, and had chosen farewell gifts for the syrens, including a superb diamond hoop for the slim round wrist of Löttchen, in whose eyes he had seen tears of real tenderness yesterday when a violent access of his cough had left him speechless and exhausted. For every tear he would give her a diamond of purest water, and yet would think her tears poorly recompensed.

He went down to the rooms for the last time that season. Would he ever see those rooms again, he wondered, at any season? Were not all seasons fast closing for him: or would science, aided by wealth, patch up these feeble lungs of his, and spin out the frail thread of existence yet a few more years in the summer lands of earth? He would go anywhere; to the South Seas, to the West Indies, to the Himalayas; anywhere only to live; and he told himself that Edith Champion would deem no land a place of exile where they two could live together. She had no other ties, no superior claim of duty, or exaggerated filial love. Her sacrifice to her husband's manes and to society's good opinion had been made. Three-quarters of her year of widowhood were spent, and when she saw what need he had of a wife's protecting companionship, she would doubtless waive the remnant of that ceremonial year, and marry him off-hand, at the Florentine Legation.

The thought of her was in his mind to-night. He had enjoyed his week of folly; the sound of the jester's bells had been sweet in his ear; but he was weary of that silvery jingle, and he looked forward with pleasure to the sober luxuries and splendours of his life with Edith.

He was in treaty, through Justin Jermyn, for the *Jersey Lily*, one of the finest yachts at Nice, and with this yacht he and his wife would make a tour of all the fairest ports of the Mediterranean —lingering or hastening as caprice prompted.

The shabby little woman was at her post as usual, and one furtive glance at her face told Gerard that luck had been against her. She had the rigid, death-like look he knew so well. He stood on the opposite side of the table watching her—across the burly shoulders of an English bookmaker, returning from a race-meeting in the Roman Campagna, and loud in his denunciation of the pari-mutuel system. Her bad luck continued. Stake after stake—ventures which had dwindled to the minimum morsel of gold—were swept away by the inexorable rake, until she sat with clasped hands, watching and not playing; too well known an habituée to be asked to make way for the players. The officials knew her ways, and that after sitting statue-like during two or three deals she would rise slowly, as one awakening from a painful dream, and walk quietly away—to reappear the following night with money obtained none knew how.

Gerard felt in his breast pocket for a bundle of notes, and went round the table towards the back of the lady's chair, intending to push the money quietly into her hand, and to vanish before she had recovered from her surprise at his action; but his intention was frustrated, for as his hand brushed against her shoulder she started up suddenly as if she had been stung, and turned upon him with eyes that burnt like coals of fire in her pallid face. The rapidity of her movement and that burning gaze disconcerted him. He drew back in confusion.

The lady advanced upon him as he retreated, until they were at some distance from the tables, away from the glare of the lamps. Then she stopped, fixing him with her fiery eyes.

"You do not appear to be an ardent gambler, monsieur," she said.

"No, madame, I am not a gambler. Trente et quarante is utterly without interest for me."

"Why then do you haunt these rooms?"

"I come to observe others, and to be amused."

"Amused by evil passions which you do not share, amused as devils are amused with the vices and passions of humanity. Do you not know that your presence here is odious, that your glances bring misfortune wherever they rest?"

"I do not know why that should be. I have no malicious intention. I am only a looker-on."

"So is death a looker-on at the game of life, knowing that sooner or later he must win. Your presence here is fatal, for there is death in your face; and since this room was not built for idle observers, but for business-like players, you will be doing everybody a favour by absenting yourself in future. I am assured that I have expressed the desire of the whole assembly."

She made him a sweeping curtsey, drew her ragged shawl about her shoulders, and passed him on her way to the door. He stood with his packet of notes still in his hand, looking after her dumbly.

Yet one more voice to remind him of approaching doom.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"SOME LITTLE SOUND OF UNREGARDED TEARS."

The farewell festival had been arranged by Justin Jermyn with especial care. He had secured the *Jersey Lily*, the yacht for which Gerard hankered. Her owner, a rich commercial man, was tired of his plaything, and was glad to sell her to a purchaser who did not drive a hard bargain. The yacht, a fine sailer, with auxiliary steam, was in full working order, and Gerard's first cruise was to be this water picnic. For music Mr. Jermyn was no longer content with itinerant Neapolitans. He had engaged some of the best performers at the famous concerts in the Casino. But his greatest success was with the floral decorations. In these he had surpassed himself, while he had ransacked the Algerian shops on the hill for Oriental fabrics, gay with gold and colour, and glittering with morsels of looking-glass, to drape cabins and poop.

March was drawing to an end, and the weather was delicious, the April summer of the South, weather that would make even the dull flats of Essex or Norfolk enchanting, but which over that lovely land breathes an intoxicating influence, giving to age the gladness of youth, to weakness the pride of strength.

Lunch was over, and the yacht was lying to in the roadstead of Antibes. Some of the more enterprising of the party had been rowed ashore, and had set out on a pilgrimage to the church on the height—the church with its curious votive pictures, showing the Madonna's merciful interposition in all the perils of life, from a headlong fall out of a garret window to the overturning of a bicycle. Less active and exploring spirits were content to loll upon the deck, where low chairs and luxurious cushions invited slumberous ease. Fans were waving languidly in the golden light of afternoon, as if in time to the languid movement of the water fanned by the western wind. On one side stretched the long level seafront of Nice, with its line of white villas flashing in the sunlight, far off to the rock crowned with the lighthouse, and that jutting point which shuts off the eastern sky towards Villefranche and St. Jean.

Gerard was in high spirits. He wanted to drain this cup of casual pleasures to the dregs. He wanted to steep himself in the loveliness of a coast which he might never look upon again. It was bliss only to stand upon the deck as the yacht lay at anchor and gaze upon that noble range of hills, with varied lights and shadows flitting across them, and that fair subtropical Eden in the middle distance, where the sapphire sea kissed the low, level shore —a smiling land of aloes and palms, orange groves, and grey-green olive woods, with here and there white walls and pinnacles gleaming amidst the green. It was enough of bliss only to breathe such an atmosphere and feel the inexpressible beauty of earth.

"How happy you look to-day!" said Löttchen, watching the giver of the feast, as he leaned against the gunwale, and looked dreamily across the harbour to the rugged hill, along whose crest straggles the old-world city of Vence.

They two were alone in the bows, while the rest of the party were congregated in a joyous group in the stern, whence there came at intervals the deep, grave music of a 'cello, and the plaintive singing sound of violins in a serenade by Schubert. Pensive music, light laughter, floated towards these two on the summer wind. The German girl had followed Gerard when he withdrew from the noisy herd, leaving the inexhaustible Jermyn as its central figure, inspiring and sustaining the general mirth with that joyous laugh of his. Löttchen had stolen after Gerard, uninvited; but he was not so ungallant as to let her suppose that she was unwelcome.

"Yes," he said, "happy, but with only a sensuous happiness—the happiness of a well-cared-for cat basking and blinking in the sun; happiness which vanishes at the first touch of thought. I am basking in the beauty of my Mother Earth, and if I think at all my only thought is that it would be sweet to live for ever—soulless, mindless, immortal—amidst such scenes as these; to live as the olives live on the slope of yonder hill, breathing the sweetness of this balmy air, feeling the glad warmth of this bounteous sun."

"It would be very dull after a week or two," said Löttchen, "and then what is life without love?"

"Life is much more than love. See how utterly happy children are in the enjoyment of the universe, and they know nothing of love—or at least of the passion to which you and I attach that name. To my fancy, this world would be perfect if we could be immortal and always children. That is the world of the elder gods. The deities of the rivers and the mountains, water-nymphs and wood-nymphs, what were they all but grown-up children, drunken with the sweetness and glory of life? But for us poor worms, whose every breath brings us nearer to the inevitable grave, what can this exquisite earth, with its infinite variety of loveliness, be but a passing show? We look, and long for its beauty; and even as we look it fades and melts into the dark. It is lovely still, but we are gone. Some one else will be watching those hills next year, some one as young as I am, and, like me, doomed to die in his youth."

Löttchen was silent. Tears were streaming down the fair cheek when Gerard turned to look at her.

She was lovely, engaging, sentimental—all that might charm a lover: but she left his heart cold as marble. Simply dressed in some soft fabric of purest white, and with a little white sailor hat perched on the artistic fluffiness of her flaxen hair, she looked the image of innocent girlhood, unspotted by the world. A man might easily forget all her history in such a moment as this, seeing the tears streaming from the large lucid eyes, the tender lips tremulous with emotion.

"Do not waste your tears or your sympathy upon me, Fräulein," Gerard said gently. "Weep only for the dying who do not grieve for themselves. I am utterly selfish, and am consumed by regret for my own doom."

"You might live longer, perhaps, if you were more careful of yourself," she said.

"There is no care that I would not take to live. It is only because I know the case is hopeless that I have given myself up. There is nothing left for me but concentrated pleasures. There ought to be a melted pearl in every glass of wine I drink. And you have given me your pity—and pity from you has been sweet."

"Pity!" she echoed, with a deep sigh. "Well, call it pity, if you like."

He took a little velvet case from his pocket, and opened it in the sunlight. It seemed in that first flash of vivid light as if he had opened a box of sunshine more brilliant than those rays that danced upon the waves and turned the mountain clay to gold. The sunlight flashed back from the diamond circlet with rainbow glory, rose and emerald, violet, orange, blue.

"These diamonds are for your tears, Fräulein. Will you wear them sometimes as a souvenir of a dying man?"

She held out her arm as he unclasped the diamond circlet. It was a lovely arm, fair as alabaster, exquisitely modelled, dazzling to look upon as the soft white fabric fell away from it, and arm and wrist and tapering hand lay there, beautiful in the sunshine. There were those among Mdlle. Charlotte's admirers who declared that her arm and hand were her crowning beauty, and nearer the perfection of Greek sculpture than any other hand and arm in Paris.

Gerard clasped the diamond hoop upon the slender wrist, as it lay in languid grace upon the gunwale—clasped it without a word, and waited with calm indifference for the gush of gratitude which usually greets such gifts; but Löttchen's lips were speechless. She let her wrist lie for a minute or so where his fingers had lightly touched it as he clasped the bracelet, and then, with an inarticulate cry of grief or rage, she tore the snap asunder, and flung the flashing circlet into the sea.

"Do you think I care anything for your diamonds, when you care nothing for me?" she cried, and then ran away to the cabin, which had been made into a miniature zenana for Jermyn's bevy of sultanas, and emerged therefrom no more till the boat returned to Monte Carlo in the moonlight, minus Gerard Hillersdon, who landed at Antibes, in order to be in time for the express for Genoa, which left Nice before sundown.

That little outbreak of Löttchen's touched him more than her beauty or her tears. "Queen Guinevere in little," he said to himself, as he looked after the retreating figure. "I suppose women are alike all the world over. Dick Steele best described the sex when he called woman 'a beautiful romantic animal.' There is a spice of romance in them all—even in the most experienced demi-mondaine in Paris. Poor Löttchen!"

He saw her no more, for she was not among those who crowded to the side of the yacht to see him drop into the dinghy. Her fair hand was not among those which waved him farewell as the row-boat moved swiftly towards the shore.

"*A riverdervi* next week at Florence," cried Jermyn; and from the quay where he landed Gerard looked back and saw the Fate-reader's lissom figure sharply defined against the sky as he stood on a raised portion of the deck, with the syrens grouped about him.

It was in the sunset that Gerard bade farewell to the western Riviera, and set his face towards Genoa. Never can that lovely shore look lovelier than just at that season of the year—than just at that hour of dying day. Over all the hills there lay the reflected flush from that crimson glory lingering yonder above the dark ridge of the Esterelles; over all the gardens, with their purple-red bloom of Bougainvilliers, their luxury of roses white and yellow, there hung the glamour of sunset; and over all the eastern sky spread an opaline splendour flecked with little rosy cloudlets, which looked like winged creatures full of exultant life, high up in that enchanted heaven. By every form of bay and inlet; by every delicate and gracious curve that the seashore can make, by rosy rock and shadowy olive wood, by every entrancing change from light to colour and from colour to light, the train sped onwards to the darkness of fortress-crowned Ventimiglia, where there was nearly half an hour's weariness and confusion, while Mr. Hillersdon's servant did battle with the Custom House officers, and transferred his master and his master's baggage to the Italian train. Then came a restless endeavour to slumber, more fatiguing than absolute wakefulness, and finally midnight and Genoa, where the traveller rested for a night.

He was in Florence on the following afternoon, and the first idea with which that city inspired him was that he had left summer behind him. Some there are to whom the western Riviera is the supreme perfection of Italian landscape, and to whom all other spots seem cold and sombre as compared with that rich loveliness. Some there are who think that the chief glory of Italy is wanting when they have turned their back upon the Mediterranean, and that all that history, legend, and the fine arts can yield of interest and beauty is tame and dull compared with the magic of that sapphire sea, and the romantic variety of those rugged hills which look down upon it.

Gerard, walking through the streets of Florence on a grey March afternoon—March as chill and windy as he had ever known in Piccadilly—felt that a glamour had gone out of his life, and a warmth had left his veins. How dull the houses looked on the Lung'arno, palatial no doubt, all that the soul of an architect could desire; but are there not palatial houses in Piccadilly and Kensington? How grey the river, rushing over its weirs; how cold the colouring of the stone bridge; how bleak the snow line of the Apennines! Tired as he was after the long journey from Genoa, he had preferred to walk to his destination, leaving servant and luggage to be driven to the Hotel de la Ville, where his rooms had been engaged for him.

He had given Mrs. Champion no notice of his arrival. He wanted to take her by surprise, to see in her face that he had lost nothing of the love which was his a year ago. He had had his caprice—had given all that was warmest and best in his nature to another woman; and now he wanted to take up the thread of life where he had dropped it a year ago, when he followed Hester Davenport across St. James' Park, and felt the swift, sudden influence of love at first sight. He wanted to love again, in the old, reasonable, sober fashion; he wanted again to feel the mild affection which had sustained his interest in Edith Champion during the three years of her wedded life.

Her house was on the side of the hill leading to San Miniato—a villa in a delicious garden, where the magnolia buds shone silver-white amid the dark glossy leafage, and where broad beds of flame-coloured tulips relieved the velvet monotony of the lawn, while a tall hedge of pink peonies shivered in that scathing Florentine wind which has not been ill described as an east wind blowing from the west.

It was a long walk from the station to that verdure-clothed hill on the southern side of the river, and Gerard was very weary when he arrived at the Villa Bel Visto, which overlooked the Boboli Gardens, and all the glory of Cupola and Campanile, far away to those fair hills northward of the city. On a sunny day the prospect would have cheered him with its beauty; but under this cold, grey British sky even dome and bell-tower lost something of their soothing influence, and Gerard regretted the sun-baked slopes above Monaco, where he seemed to have left summer behind him.

The gates stood wide open, and there were a good many smart carriages waiting in the semicircular drive. The hall door was also open, while a distinctly British footman aired his idleness on the broad flight of marble steps, and looked with supercilious gaze upon the opposite hills. Gerard passed into the house uninterrogated, and found himself in a vestibule, from which several doors opened. The light was dim, the atmosphere warm with the friendly glow of a wood fire, and beyond, through half open doors, he heard the subdued murmurings of voices, mostly feminine, which suddenly dropped into silence as he approached, silence broken by the flowing phrases of a symphony, and then by a fine baritone attacking the fashionable lament—*Vorrei morir.* A majordomo, tall, handsome, and Tuscan, stood near the lofty folding doors, ready to announce visitors, and looked interrogatively at Mr. Hillersdon, who waited in silence till the end of the song.

Mrs. Champion was evidently receiving—it might be an afternoon party, or perhaps only her "day." Her later letters had told him of a few Florentine acquaintances, who dropped in occasionally to cheer her solitude; but he was unprepared for the crowd of well-dressed women and distinguished-looking men amidst whom he found himself when Tosti's pensive strain had died in a prolonged diminuendo, and he allowed the major-domo to announce him.

The afternoon light shone full upon a window which occupied nearly one side of the spacious drawing-room, and in this light Gerard saw Edith Champion standing in a group of elegant women of various nationalities—herself the handsomest of all, like an empress among her ladies of honour. She wore deepest black, but the heavy folds of the rich corded silk suggested grandeur rather than gloom, and the tulle coif, *à la* Marie Stuart, only gave a piquancy to the coronet of plaited hair which rose above her low, broad brow.

She started at the sound of her lover's name, and hurried to meet him.

"Welcome to Florence," she cried gaily, "though there is no one in the world whom I less expected to see. Have you only just come?"

"I have been in Florence less than an hour."

Her hand was in his, her lips were parted in a pleased smile, but as he came into the light of the wide window, he saw her expression change suddenly to a look of grieved surprise. He knew only too well what that look meant, though she gave no utterance to her thoughts. A year ago his friends frequently told him that he looked ill; but of late no one had told him so. He had only read in their faces the evil augury which they saw in his face.

"I have come upon a festive occasion," he said, glancing round at the crowd.

"Oh, it is only my afternoon at home. People are so sociable in Florence. I have more people than usual to-day, because I let my friends know that Signor Amaldi had promised to sing. May I introduce him to you? No doubt you heard of him in London the season before last. He makes a sensation wherever he goes."

She beckoned to a small gentleman with fiery black eyes, and a large moustache, who lolled against the gaily draped piano, the centre of an admiring group, and the introduction was made.

Gerard knew enough Italian to compliment the singer in his own language without any grave offences against grammatical laws, and Signor Amaldi replied effusively, protesting that his musical gifts were poor things, mere wayside weeds, which he delighted to cast under the feet of the most gracious of English ladies.

Anon the piano was taken prisoner by a cadaverous German, with tawny hair, as closely cropped as if he were a fugitive from Portland, and this gentleman expounded Chopin for the next half hour, amidst general inattention. The two English footmen were handing tea and chocolate, the women were whispering together in corners, and from an adjoining room came the tinkling of silver and glass at a liberally supplied buffet, at which a good many of the guests had congregated. But still those Hungarian war cries, those funereal wailings, shrieked and crashed, sobbed and sighed from the hard-ridden piano, while the German played on for his own pleasure and contentment, flinging up head and hands now and then in a sudden rapture during a bar of silence, and then swooping down upon the black notes like a bird of prey, and firing a volley of minor chords that startled the chatterers at the buffet and the whisperers in the corners of the salon.

During this musical interlude Edith and Gerard had time for a confidential talk.

"I hardly expected to find you so gay," he said.

"Surely you don't call this gaiety—a little music and a few pleasant people who have taken pity upon my solitude, and forced their acquaintance upon me. Florence is a gloomy place if one does not know people. There is so little to do after one has exhausted the galleries, and taken the three or four excursions which are *de rigueur*. But now you and the spring have come we can take all the old excursions together, bask in the sunshine at Fiesole, and buy perfumery from the dear old monks at the Certosa. I am so glad you have come."

"And yet you commanded me not to come until your year of mourning was ended. You refused to abate a single week."

"One is glad sometimes to have one's commands disobeyed. But tell me what made you come. Why did you disobey?"

"Because my yearning for you was stronger than my obedience. I was utterly miserable, and I longed to see you."

"I am afraid you have been neglecting your health while I have been away," she said, looking at him earnestly.

"I have been ailing—but I am well now that I am with you. I look to you and Italy for healing. I have bought a yacht, and I am going to carry you off in it, as soon as the days are fair and long."

"That will not be till June, when my year of widowhood will be over."

"I am not going to wait for June. I am not going to wait for May. I snap my fingers at Mrs. Grundy. If you can give tea-parties you can marry me. My days of submission and waiting are over."

She laughed, and laid her hand gently upon his for a moment, and looked at him, and then sighed, while her eyes filled with sudden tears. She rose hurriedly and went away to talk to people who were leaving, and for the next quarter of an hour she was standing near the door bidding her friends good-bye.

Gerard moved about the rooms restlessly, but discovered no one whom he knew. He saw people looking at him with that quick furtive air in which good breeding struggle with curiosity. Suddenly he found himself in front of a large looking-glass, and saw himself from head to foot in the foreground of a group of well-dressed people, the women elegant and graceful, the men trim and well set-up.

How ghastly he looked, with his cadaverous cheeks and sunken eyes, doubtless a natural result of that wild week at Monte Carlo! How shabby, too, he to whom tailors' bills were of no consequence, he who in the days of his poverty had been the monitor of other young men, distinguished for the sober perfection of his toilet. Now, with his clothes hanging slackly upon his wasted frame, with the dust of travel still upon him, he looked an ugly blot upon the splendid elegance of Mrs. Champion's drawing-room. He went away hurriedly, slipping out by the dining-room door, unseen by Edith. He meant to have stayed and talked with her when the guests were gone, but a sudden disgust at life and at himself seized him as he contemplated his face and figure in the tall Venetian glass; and the thought of a *tête-à-tête* with his sweetheart was no longer pleasant to him.

He was with her next morning, before luncheon, and on this occasion the glass reflected at least a well-dressed man. He had taken particular pains with his toilet, and the pale grey *complet* and white silk tie had all the cool freshness of spring, while from the chief florist's in the Via Tornabuoni he carried a large nosegay of lilies of the valley and niphetos roses, as tribute to his mistress.

She welcomed him delightedly, and complimented him upon his improved appearance.

"You were really looking ill yesterday," she said; "a long dusty railway journey is so exhausting. This morning you have renewed your youth."

"And I mean to keep young, if I can. Am I over bold if I invite myself to your dejeuner?"

"I should think you very foolish if you waited for me to invite you. Come as often and as much as you can. Your knife and fork shall be laid for every meal. My sheep-dog will be on duty again this afternoon. She has been at Siena with some clerical friends, who insisted upon carrying her off to help them with her French and Italian—both of which, by the way, are odious."

"Are sheep-dogs wanted in Florence? I have been taught to think that Florentine society asks no questions."

"That shows your insular ignorance. Good society in Florence is like good society everywhere else."

"I understand. Severe virtue, tempered by Russian Princesses and their *cavaliere servente*."

They lunched *tête-à-tête*, under the protecting eyes of the major-domo and the two British footmen, in funereal liveries and powdered hair. There was no opportunity for confidential talk, nor did Gerard desire anything better than this light, airy gossip about people they knew, and the ways and works of their own particular world, at home and on the Continent, from Royalties downwards. He enjoyed this light talk. It seemed to him that he had left passion, with its accompaniment of sorrow, on the shores of the Thames. To sit by the wood fire in Mrs. Champion's salon, playing with her Russian poodle, or turning over the newest French and German books, or peeping into the dainty little vellum-bound Florentine classics on the book-table, while the lady sat by the window and embroidered flame-coloured azalias on a ground of sea-green satin, sufficed him. He felt restful, and almost happy. He was as much at ease with his *fiancée* as if they were old married people. He told her of his yacht, and all its luxuries and modern improvements. He talked of those sunny Greek isles which they were to visit together.

"I hope you will order some Greek gowns in your trousseau," he said; "I shall want you to dress like Sappho or Lesbia when we are at Cyprus or Corfu."

"I will wear anything you like, but I think a neat tailor gown made of white serge would be smarter and more shipshape than chiton or peplum."

The long afternoon was delightful to Gerard, and in spite of occasional anxious glances at her lover's face, Mrs. Champion seemed happy. It was pleasant to talk of that summer tour in the Greek Archipelago and the Golden Horn—how they were to go to this place or that to avoid undue heat; how they were to bask in the sun so long as his rays were agreeable; and how, before the days shortened again, they were to decide whether they would winter in Algiers or in Egypt, or whether it might not please them to travel further afield, to Ceylon, for instance, and that strange, gorgeous, antique world of Hindostan. There was all the restful consciousness of wealth underlying these day-dreams, the knowledge that the cost of things could make no difference.

Mrs. Gresham came buzzing in at tea-time, and after having endured her chatter about the Cathedral, the mosaics, the pictures, and the *table d'hôte* at Siena—including the wonder of wonders in having met Mrs. Rawdon Smith, of Chelmsford, and her daughter—for nearly an hour, Gerard took his leave, promising to return next day to luncheon, and to drive to Fiesole with Mrs. Champion and her cousin in the afternoon, provided the sun shone, which it had not done since his arrival in Florence.

He went back to his hotel, and dined in the solitude of a spacious salon overlooking the river and the Piazza. The candles were lighted within, clusters of candles in two tall candelabra, which brightened the table, but left the angles of the room in shadow. Outside the three large windows the evening was pale and grey, and in that soft greyness the lights on the old bridge and all along the quays shone golden.

Gerard, who was seldom able to eat alone, left his meal and went over to one of the windows. He opened the casement, and stood looking out over the marble bridge, and the rushing weir, and listening to the evening sounds of Florence, with his elbows resting on the red velvet cushion which covered the sill. First came the tattoo, and the sound of soldiers marching in the piazza, the trumpet-call repeated and then dying away in the distance; and then the sonorous bell of the church of All Saints filled the air, calling the faithful to an evening service. It was Holy Week, and there were services daily and nightly in the church yonder—lighted altars, tapers innumerable, throngs of worshippers.

The bell ceased after a while; and there was no sound but the water rushing over the weir, or occasional footsteps across the empty square. Then the bell pealed out again, slow, solemn, funereal, and from a cloister beside the church issued the funeral train in all its Florentine awfulness—hooded monks, flaming torches, darkly shrouded bier. Gerard shut the casement with angry suddenness, and went back to the deserted dinner-table. He had dismissed all service. The wine flasks and untasted desert alone remained in the light of the clustering candles.

The solitude within, the dismal tolling of the bell without, the heavy colouring of the dimly lighted room, weighed upon his spirits. He took up his hat and went out. The streets would be infinitely more agreeable than that spacious emptiness within four walls.

The streets looked gay and bright in spite of Holy Week. Lighted shop windows, people passing to and fro; far better this than the shadows of an empty room. There was neither opera nor theatre open, or he would have sought distraction of that kind. Great flaming posters announced various performances of the lowest music-hall type, and strictly British. From these he recoiled. He passed the lighted portico of a fashionable club, but did not test its hospitality. He turned out of a broad street into a narrow one—a short cut to the Piazza Santa Maria Novella. A flare of yellow light filled the further end of the street. Something festal doubtless in defiance of Lent.

No, not festal. Again the black cowls, the flaming torches, the darkly shrouded bier, and suddenly from Santa Maria yonder the slow and solemn bell. He turned on his heel, retraced his steps quickly, emerged into the bright broad street he had just left, only to meet another procession. Again the cowls, the torches, and the bier.

Florence was alive with funerals. There was nothing doing in the city, it seemed to him, but the burial of the dead. These funerals creeping through the night, mysterious under that uncertain flare of the torches, made death more awful. He hurried away towards the river, overtook an empty fly, and told the man to drive him to Mrs. Champion's villa, as fast as a Florentine horse would go. He felt a need of human companionship, of a warm, loving heart beating against his own, his own which seemed cold and dead as the hearts of those quiet sleepers who were being carried through the streets to-night.

"I am not fit to be alone," he told himself, as the light vehicle rattled over the bridge to the Porta Romana. "I am full of vague apprehensions, like a child that has been frightened by his nurse. What is that strange fear of children, I wonder, that innate horror of something unexplained, indescribable? What but the hereditary dread of death, the infinite horror handed down from generation to generation, a fear which precedes knowledge, an instinct which antedates sense. In spite of Locke and all his school, there is one innate idea, if only one, and that is the fear of death. The wolf, the bear, the black man of the nurse's story, are all different images of that one unthinkable form."

He was ashamed of his own weakness, which had been so shaken by the passing of funerals in which he had no interest; but that tolling bell and those cowled monks had filled him with gloomy fancies. He thought of the plague-stricken city of the fourteenth century, and how Death held his court here while a few miles away in the garden in Doccia's dell light-hearted ladies listened to stories that have become part and parcel of the world's poesy, and then the song which he had heard yesterday in Mrs. Champion's drawing-room recurred to him—

"'Vorrei morir' quando tramonta il sole,
Quando sui prato dormon le viole,
Lieta farebbe a Dio l'alma ritorno,
A primavera e sui morir del giorno."

Alas, and alas! would death be any sweeter to him because of a lovely sunset, or a woodland starred with primroses and banks purple with sweet-scented violets? What to him was spring or winter if he must die? Whether his last breath went forth on the wings of the storm, like Cromwell's and Napoleon's, or whether his fading eyes turned their last look upon the placid loveliness of a summer evening in a pastoral country, could matter nothing to him. Death meant the end—and death was unspeakably cruel.

Mrs. Champion and her cousin were sauntering in the garden after dinner, in the light of the Easter moon, very tired of each other's society, and even of the garden. Every life has these dim evening hours, when there seems to be nothing to live for.

"How good of you!" cried Edith, recognising her lover in the moonlight.

There was a fountain in a shallow marble basin sending up its waters from the shadow of surrounding foliage into the silvery light, and near the fountain a broad marble bench with crimson cushions spread upon it, where Mrs. Champion was wont to sit. She seated herself on this bench to-night, and, after a few words of commonplace, Gerard took his place at her side, while Mrs. Gresham discreetly returned to the drawing-room, the poodle, and a Tauchnitz novel.

"You did not expect to see me so soon again, did you, Edith?"

"I did not expect—no—but I am so much the more glad."

"I could not live without you. I felt an aching wish to be with some one who loves me—to feel that I have still some hold upon warm human life."

And then he told her about the three funerals in the streets of Florence.

"Is it often so?" he asked. "Does Florence swarm with funerals?"

"My dear Gerard," she exclaimed laughingly. "Three! For a city of two hundred thousand inhabitants! Does that mean much? It is only the torchlight and the Brothers of the Misericordia that impressed you. How superior to anything one sees in England! So mediæval! so paintable! But don't let us talk of funerals."

"No, indeed! I am here to talk of something widely different. I want to talk of a wedding—our wedding, Edith. When is it to be?"

"Next June, if you like," she answered quietly.

"But I do not like. June is ages away. Who knows if we may live to June. The monks may be carrying us through the dark narrow streets in the flare of their torches before June. I want you to marry me to-morrow——"

"Gerard, in Holy Week!"

"What do I care for Holy Week? But if you care, let us be married on Easter Monday. We can start for Spezia after the ceremony, and dine on board my yacht, in the loveliest harbour in Europe. We can watch yonder moon shining on the ghostly whiteness of the Carrara mountains, whiter, more picturesque, than those snow-peaked Apennines."

"So soon!"

"And why not soon?" he urged impatiently. "Edith, have I not waited long enough? Did I not consume my soul in three long years of waiting? Have I not wasted the best years of my youth in silken dalliance, and frittered away any talents I ever possessed upon the idlest of love-letters, in which I was forbidden to talk of love? Edith, I have been your slave—give me something for my service before it is too late!"

"You are such a despondent lover," she said, with a forced laugh.

"Despondent, no; but I feel the need of your love. I feel that I am isolated, that I cannot live without some stronger nature than my own to lean upon, and that your character can supply all that is wanting in mine. We ought to be happy, Edith. We have youth, wealth, freedom, all the elements of happiness."

"Yes," she answered, with a faint sigh, "we ought to be happy."

"Let it be Monday, then. I will arrange all details."

"Easter Monday! What a vulgar day for a wedding!"

"Is it vulgar? No matter, our marriage will be performed so quietly that hardly any one will know anything about it till they see the announcement in the *Times*."

"Well, it must be as you like. You have been very good and devoted to me in all these years, and I don't think I shall be wanting in respect to my poor James, if I consent to marry you in April instead of June, though I dare say my sisters and people will talk. And as for my trousseau, I have plenty of gowns that will do well enough for your yacht. You must take me to Palestine, Gerard. I have always longed to see the Holy Land."

"You shall go wherever you like. You shall be captain and commander of the *Jersey Lily*," he answered, bending down to kiss the beautiful hand that moved in slow measure, waving a feather fan. "She shall sail wherever you order her."

They went into the house after this, and found Rosa Gresham yawning over her novel, and the poodle yawning on his bearskin rug. Nothing could have been less romantic than this final wooing; and if Gerard had not been too self-absorbed to observe keenly, he must have been struck by the contrast between Mrs. Champion's manner to-night and in old days in Hertford Street.

They drove through the dust and shabbiness of the outskirts of Florence next day, and up to the hill-top, where Fiesole, the mother city, hangs like an eagle's nest against a background of cloudless blue.

The day was steeped in sunshine and balmiest air, and it was a happiness to escape from Lenten Florence, with her solemn bells, to this winding road which went climbing upward by terraced gardens, and cypress hedges, and banks that glowed with tulips and anemones, and fields where the young corn shone tender-green in the sunlight.

Here, while the horses rested, Mrs. Gresham went to explore the cathedral, leaving Edith and Gerard free to climb the steep path to the little grove on the top of the hill, where a steep flight of rugged stone steps lead up to the Franciscan convent and the church of St. Alessandro. Slowly, and very slowly, Gerard mounted that stony way, leaning on Edith Champion's arm, with sorely labouring breath. He stopped, breathless and exhausted, in front of an open shop, where an old man was mending shoes, who at once laid down his work, and brought out a chair for the tired Englishman. Edith entreated him to go no further, tried to persuade him that the view was quite as fine from the point they had reached as from the summit, but he persisted, and after resting for a few minutes, he tossed a five franc piece to the civil cobbler—leaving him overpowered at the largeness of the donation—and went labouring up the few remaining yards to the dusty little terrace, where a group of noisy Germans and a group of equally noisy Americans were expatiating upon the panorama in front of them.

He sank panting upon the rough wooden bench, and Edith sat by his side in silence, holding his hand, which was cold and damp.

A deadly chill crept into her heart as she sat there, hand in hand with the man whose life was so soon to be joined with her life. The same vague horror had crept over her two days ago, when she had stood face to face with her lover in the clear afternoon light, and had seen the ravages which less than a year had made in his countenance—had seen that which her fear told her was the stamp of death.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"COULD TWO DAYS LIVE AGAIN OF THAT DEAD YEAR."

There were necessary delays which postponed the marriage till the end of the coming Easter week, and the panic caused by tolling bells and torchlight funerals having passed away, Gerard was less impatient, willing indeed that events should follow a natural course. Yet although the fever of impatience had spent itself, there was no looking backward, no remorseful thought of her whose character would be blasted for ever by this act of his, or of the unborn child whose future he might have shielded from the chances of evil. Not once did he contemplate the possibility of obtaining his release from Edith Champion, by a full confession of that other tie which to her womanly feeling would have been an insuperable bar to their marriage. All finer scruples, all the instincts of honour and of pity were lost in that tremendous self-love which, seeing life shrinking to narrowest limits, was intent on one thing only, to make the most of the life that remained to him, the life which was all.

He rallied considerably after that day at Fiesole, and was equal to being taken about from church to church by Edith and her eager cousin, who could not have enough of the Florentine churches in this sacred season. He met them at the great door of the cathedral on Good Friday, after they had satisfied their scruples as pious Anglicans by attending a service at the English church—service which Rosa denounced as hatefully low—and he went with them to hear a litany at the altar under Brunelleschi's dome, a solemn and awe-inspiring function, a double semicircle of priests and choristers within the marble dado and glass screen that enclosed the altar—lugubrious chanting unrelieved by the organ—and at the close of the service a sudden startling clangour.

Then the doors open, and priests and acolytes pour out in swift succession, priests in rich vestments, violet and gold, scarlet tippets, white fur, black stoles, a motley train, vanishing quickly towards the sacristy.

And now the crowd troop into the sanctuary, and ascend the steps of the altar, Gerard and his companions following, he curious only, they deeply impressed by that old-world ceremonial. And one by one devout worshippers bend to kiss the jasper slab of the altar, on which stands a golden cross, richly jewelled, which contains a fragment of that cross whereon the Man of Sorrows died for sinful, sorrowing man.

"I hope it was not wrong of me to do as the others did," said Edith presently, as they left the cathedral, her eyes still dim with tears.

"Wrong!" ejaculated Rosa, who had performed the Romanistic rite with unction. "No, indeed. I look forward to the day when we shall have relics in our own churches."

On Holy Saturday there was the spectacular display in front of the cathedral, and at this Gerard was constrained to assist, and to sit in a sunlit window for nearly an hour, watching the humours of the good-tempered crowd in the Piazza, while the great black tabernacle, covered with artificial roses, squibs, and Catherine wheels, awaited the sacred flame which was to set all its fireworks exploding—flame which descended in a lightning flash on the wings of a dove from the lamp of the altar within the cathedral, sacred light which a pious pilgrim had carried unextinguished from the temple in Jerusalem to this Tuscan city. The dove came rushing down the invisible guiding wire at the first stroke of noon, and then with much talk and laughter the crowd melted out of the Piazza, and the daily traffic was resumed, and Mrs. Champion's landau came to the door of the umbrella shop over which she had hired her window, and they drove away to the Via Tornabuoni, and the house of Doney, where luncheon had been ordered and a room engaged for them, luncheon at which Mrs. Champion's powdered slave officiated, and got in the way of the brisk waiters, to whom his slow and solemn movements were an abomination. Only out of England could there come such sad and solemn bearing, thought the waiters.

On Sunday there was High Mass at the Church of S. Maria Annunziata, and Gerard and the two ladies had seats under the dome, where Mozart's Twelfth Mass was nobly sung by the best choir in Florence, and where priests in vestments of gold and silver, flashing with jewels, gorgeous with embroidery, officiated at the high altar; priests whose splendid raiment suggested the Priesthood of Egypt, in the days when Egyptian splendour was the crowning magnificence of the earth, to be imitated by younger nations, but never to be surpassed.

The music and the splendour, the strain on eye and ear wearied Gerard Hillersdon. He gave a sigh of relief as he took his seat in the landau opposite Edith and Mrs. Gresham, who regaled them with her raptures about the choir, the voices—that exquisite treble—that magnificent bass. She descanted on every number in the Mass, being one of those persons who wear every subject to tatters.

"And now I think we have had enough of churches," said Gerard, "and we may spend the rest of our lives in the sunshine till we sail away to the Greek Archipelago."

"And till I go back to Suffolk," sighed Mrs. Gresham. "I shall be very glad to see my dear good man again; but, oh, how dismal Sandyholme will be after Florence! And you two happy creatures will be sailing from island to island, and your life will be one delicious dream of summer. Well, I can never be grateful enough to you, Edith, for having let me see Italy. Robert Browning said that if his heart were cut open Italy would be found written upon it; and so I'm sure it would upon mine, if any one thought such an insignificant person's heart worth looking at. And Florence, dear Florence!"

"And the Via Tornabuoni where all the fashionable shops are—and Doney's, and the English tea-parties, and the English Church. I think these things would be found to hold the highest rank in your Florentine heart, Mrs. Gresham, though they don't belong to the Florence of the Medici," said Gerard, glad to damp middle-aged enthusiasm.

"That shows how very little you understand my character, Mr. Hillersdon. As for the shops—they are very smart and artistic, but I would give all the shops in the Via Tornabuoni for Whiteley's. I adore Florence most of all for her historical associations. To think that Catherine de Medici was reigning Duchess in that noble Palazzo Vecchio—who were the Vecchios, by-the-by?—some older family, I suppose—and that Dante died here, and that Giordino Bruno was burnt here, and Rossini lived here, and Browning! Such a flood of delightful memories!" concluded Rosa with a sigh.

The preparations for the wedding hung fire somehow. The day was again postponed. Mrs. Champion had discovered that it would be impossible for her to marry without an interview with her solicitor, and that gentleman had telegraphed his inability to arrive in Florence before the end of the following week.

"He is my trustee," she explained to Gerard, "and I am so unbusiness-like myself that I am peculiarly dependent upon him. I know that I am rich, and that my income is derived from things in the City, railways and foreign loans, don't you know. I write cheques for whatever I want, and Mr. Maddickson has never accused me of being extravagant, so I have no doubt I am very well off. But if I were to marry you without his arranging my affairs I don't know what entanglement might happpen."

"What entanglement could there be? Am I not rich enough to live without touching your fortune?"

"My dear Gerard, I didn't mean any doubt of you—not for one moment—but the more money we have the more necessary it must be to arrange things legally, must it not?"

"I don't think so. To my mind we are as free as the birds of the air, and all these delays wound me."

"Don't say that, Gerard. You know how firmly I made up my mind not to marry for a year after poor James' death; and if I give way upon that point to gratify a whim of yours——"

"A whim! How lightly you speak! Perhaps you would rather we never married at all."

He was white with anger. She reddened and averted her face.

"Is it so?" he asked.

"No, no, of course not," she answered, "only I don't want to be hustled into marriage."

"Hustled, no, but life is short. If you can't make up your mind to marry me within a fortnight from this day, we will cry quits for my three years' slavery, and will bid each other good-bye. There is a woman in England who won't set up imaginary impediments if I ask her to be my wife."

His voice broke in a suppressed sob as he spoke the last words. Ah, that woman in England, that woman for whom love had been more than honour, that woman who was to be the mother of his child!

"How cruel you are, Gerard!" exclaimed Edith, scared at the thought of losing him; "no doubt there are hundreds of women in England who would like to marry you, with your wealth, just as there are hundreds of men who would pretend to be passionately in love with me, for the same motive. We can be married within a fortnight, I have no doubt. I'll telegraph again to Mr. Maddickson, and tell him he must come. I am having my wedding-gown made. You would not like me to be married in black."

"I don't know that I should care. I want to make an end of senseless delays. The *Jersey Lily* is at Spezia, ready for us. Jermyn is to be here this afternoon."

"Jermyn? How strange that you should be so fond of that uncanny personage."

"I never said I was fond of him. He amuses me, that's all. As for his uncanniness, that's a mere fashion. I believe he has left off reading fate in faces. He is too clever to ride any hobby to death."

"And he really got nothing for his fate-reading?"

"He got into society. I think that was all he wanted."

"Bring him to dinner this evening, and he can tell our fortunes again, if he likes."

"Not for me. I prefer a happy ignorance."

Justin Jermyn brought a considerable relief to that party of three which had begun to feel the shadow of an overpowering ennui, Edith ashamed to be sentimental in Rosa Gresham's presence, Rosa infinitely bored, and boring the other two. Mrs. Champion had shrunk from inviting her Florentine friends to meet her betrothed. He looked so wretchedly ill, his humours were so fitful and capricious, that she felt in somewise ashamed of her choice. She could not tell these people how handsome, how brilliant, how charming he had been two or three years ago. She could not inform the world that this intended marriage was the outcome of a girlish romance. She preferred to keep her little Florentine world in complete ignorance of the approaching event. It would be time enough for them to know when she and Gerard were wafted far away on the white wings of the *Jersey Lily*. And later, when he should have recovered his health and good looks, and easy, equable manners, later, when he and she had become leading lights in London society, she would be proud of him and their romantic union.

When he recovered his health? There were moments in which she asked herself shudderingly, would that ever be? He pretended to be confident about himself. He told her that to live he needed only happiness and a balmy climate; but she knew that it was a feature of that fatal malady for the patient to be hopeful in the very teeth of despair; and she had seen many indications that had filled her with alarm.

"How I wish you would consult Dr. Wilson!" she said one day, when he sat breathless on the marble bench by the fountain, after ten minutes' quiet walking. "He has immense experience in—in—all chest complaints. I am sure he would be of use to you."

"I have my own doctor in London," Gerard answered curtly. "Your Florentine doctor cannot tell me anything about myself that I don't know; and as for treatment, my valet knows what to do for me. I shall be well when we get further south. Your Florence is as treacherous as her Medicis. The winds from the Apennines are laden with evil."

Jermyn, under existing circumstances, was a decided acquisition.

His familiarity with Florence astonished and charmed the two ladies. He knew every church, every palace, every picture, the traditions of every great family that had helped to make the history of the city. Knowledge like this makes every stone eloquent. He was asked to join in all their saunterings and in all their drives, and his presence gave an air of freshness to the simplest pleasures—to the afternoon tea in the garden, and the long evenings in the salon, when Mrs. Gresham played Chopin and Schubert to her heart's content, while the other three sat afar off and talked.

"My cousin is better than an orchestrion," said Mrs. Champion, "one has only to turn the handle and she will discourse excellent music the whole evening, and forgive us for not listening to her."

"Yes, but I know that in her inmost heart Mrs. Gresham is pitying us for having a sense wanting," said Jermyn, and then went on with his talk, caring no more for the most delicate rendering of a Rubinstein reverie, than if it had been a hurdy-gurdy grinding a tuneless polka in the road beyond the garden.

* * * * * *

They all went to Spezia to look at the yacht, a railroad journey of some hours, through a hot, arid country, which tried Gerard severely, and bored the other three.

"Who would care to live at Pisa?" said Jermyn, while the train was stopping in the station outside that ancient city. "After one had looked at the Cathedral and Baptistry, the leaning tower and the Campo Santo one would feel that life was done. There is nothing more. And it is a misfortune for everybody but the Cook's tourist that the four things are close together. One can't even pretend to take a long time in seeing them."

Mrs. Champion professed herself delighted with the yacht. She explored every cabin and corner. There was a French *chef* engaged, and an Italian butler, everything was ready for a tour in the Mediterranean, and the Mediterranean as seen to-day in this sunlit harbour of Spezia, seemed a sea that could do no wrong. Jermyn showed Mrs. Champion her boudoir-dressing-room, with its ingenious receptacles for her gowns and other finery, and the cabin for her maid—an infinitesimal cabin, but full of comforts. He showed her the grand piano, the electric lamps, all the luxuries of modern yachting. There was to be no roughing it on board the *Jersey Lily*. The arrangements of this three-hundred-ton yacht left nothing to be regretted after the most perfect of continental hotels.

Edith was enchanted with everything; but even in the midst of her enthusiasm a chilling fear came over her at the thought of Gerard lying ill in that luxurious cabin, with its silken curtains and satin pillows, its white and gold Worcester, in which porcelain was made to imitate carved ivory. Sickness there—death there—in that narrow space tricked out for the Loves and Graces—disease, with its loathly details, playing havoc with all the beauty of life, illness tending inevitably towards death. She turned from that costly prettiness with a vague horror.

"Don't you like the style?" asked Jermyn, quick to see that revulsion of feeling.

"No; it is much too fine. I think a yacht should be simpler. One does not want the colouring of the Arabian Nights on the sea. Picture this cabin in a tempest—all this ornamentation tossed and flying about—a tawdry chaos."

She glanced at Gerard, who stood by, unconcerned in the discussion, obviously caring very little whether she were pleased or not, looking with dull indifferent eye upon the arrangements which had been made for his wedding tour. He had these occasional lapses of abstraction, in which he seemed to drift out of the common life of those around him; moods of sullen melancholy, which made Edith Champion shiver.

They lunched on board the *Jersey Lily*, and the luncheon was gay enough, but Jermyn and Mrs. Gresham were the chief tálkers, and it was Jermyn's laughter that gave an air of joyousness to the meal. Gerard was dreamy and silent; Edith was anxiously watchful of his moods. He was to be her husband soon, and these moods of his would make the colouring of her life. Could she be happy if the mental atmosphere were always dull and dreary? The sapphire blue of the bay, the afternoon light on the Carrara Mountains grew dim and cold in the gloom of her lover's temper; he who long ago, in the days of his poverty, had been so joyous a spirit.

She thought of James Champion, and of those monotonous visits to the house at Finchley, the weary hours she had spent trying to make conversation for a sick man, weighed down by the sense of his own infirmities, unable to take pleasure in anything. "Would Gerard ever be like that?" she asked herself with an aching dread; "would he, too, die as Champion had died, 'first a'top.'" She looked at his sunken cheek and hollow eye; she noted his absent manner; and she felt no assurance of exemption from that dreadful doom.

Happily, however, the dark mood did not last long, and Gerard was full of animation during the return journey, full of talk about the intended cruise of the *Jersey Lily*. He had talked it all over with the sailing master. They had looked at charts, they had discussed the ports they were to touch—the islands which were worth stopping at—so many days for Cyprus, and so many for Corfu.

They were to spend part of the autumn in Palestine, and to winter in Egypt, and then come slowly back to Naples in the early spring, and from Naples follow the coast in a leisurely way to Nice, and then good-bye, *Jersey Lily*, and as fast as the *Rapide* can carry us homeward, to London and Hillersdon House, and all the glories of a London season. The prospect sounded delightful, discussed in one of Gerard's brightest moods, as they travelled from Pisa to Florence; but the outlook was not quite so joyous half-an-hour later when a laugh at one of Jermyn's cynical flashes brought on a violent fit of coughing, one of those exhausting, suffocating paroxysms which had moved the fair Bavarian to such deep pity.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"AND ALL SHALL PASSE, AND THUS TAKE I MY LEAVE."

MR. MADDICKSON, Mrs. Champion's solicitor and trustee, arrived early in the following week—three days sooner than he had declared possible, urged to this haste by importunate telegrams. He was bidden to a dinner at which Mr. Hillersdon and his friend Jermyn were the only guests, in order that everything might be discussed that needed discussion, and that the lady's confidential adviser might make the acquaintance of her future husband.

It was a delicious evening, balmier than many an English July. The Easter moon had waned, and the slender crescent of the new moon shone silvery pale in a rose-flushed heaven, a heaven where in that lovely after-glow the first stars glimmered faint and wan. Mrs. Champion was in the garden with Gerard and Jermyn when the lawyer arrived, spruce and prim in his impeccable evening dress, a man who deemed it a duty he owed to his profession to employ only the most admirable of tailors. The two young men were lounging on garden-chairs in the circle by the fountain, beyond which the great pink peonies made a background of bloom and verdure. Mr. Maddickson's short-sighted eyes took the big pink blossoms for gigantic roses, such as a man might expect to find in Italy. He looked from one of the young men to the other, and at once made up his mind that the lady's *fiancé* was the fair youth leaning against the fountain, his head thrown back a little and the rosy light upon his face as he looked up at Mrs. Gresham, whose speech had just moved him to joyous laughter. Quite the sort of young man to catch a widow's fancy, thought Mr. Maddickson, who supposed it was in the nature of widows to be frivolous.

He felt a cold shiver—happily only perceptible to himself—when Mrs. Champion introduced the pale, hollow-eyed young man, with slightly bent shoulders and an unmistakable air of decay, as Mr. Hillersdon. He lost his usual aplomb, and was awkwardly silent for some minutes after that introduction.

There was a brief discussion between the lovers and the lawyer late in the evening, while Rosa and Mr. Jermyn were in the loggia, he smoking, she declaring she adored the odour of tobacco.

There were no difficulties, Mr. Maddickson told his client and her betrothed, and the settlements might be of the simplest form. He proposed as a matter of course that the lady's fortune should be settled on herself and her children, giving her full disposing power if there should be no children.

"You are so rich, Mr. Hillersdon," said the lawyer, "that these details can hardly interest you."

"They don't. I wanted Mrs. Champion to marry me out of hand ten days ago, without any legal fussification or delay. I thought the Married Women's Property Act would protect her estate, even in the event of my squandering my fortune, which I am hardly likely to do."

"It is always best to have these matters quietly discussed," said Mr. Maddickson. "A hasty marriage is rarely a wise marriage."

He gave a little sigh as he uttered this tolerably safe opinion, and rose to take leave; but before departing he paused to address Mrs. Champion in a lower tone.

"I should much like to have a little talk with you to-morrow," he said. "Shall I find you at home if I call?"

"Not in the afternoon. We are to drive to the Certosa."

"In the morning, then? I can be here at any hour you like."

"Come at twelve, and stay to lunch. We lunch at half-past twelve." And then, going with him towards the door of the salon, she said in a lower tone, "I conclude there is really nothing now to hinder my marriage?"

"Nothing, except your own inclination. I think you are marrying too soon; but we will talk of that to-morrow."

When he was gone she had an uncomfortable feeling that he would have something disagreeable to say to her when he came in the morning. People who ask for interviews in that elaborately urgent manner are seldom the bearers of pleasant tidings. She had a sleepless night, agitated by vague dread.

Mr. Maddickson was punctual to a minute, for the timepiece in the salon chimed the hour as the footman announced him, looking as fresh and trim in his checked travelling suit as he had looked in evening dress; clean-shaved, the image of respectability not unconscious of the latest fashion.

"I have spent the morning at the Academy," he said blandly, "and have become a convert to the Early Italian school. I don't wonder at Hunt, and Millais, and those young fellows, now I have seen those two walls—one splendid with the exquisite finish and lustrous colour of Giotto, Boticelli, Filippo Lippi, Fra Angelico and their disciples, and the other covered with a collection of gloomy daubs, in the high classical manner, by the worst painters of the school that came after Raffaelle."

"You have something serious to say to me?" said Edith, not caring a jot for Mr. Maddickson's opinions on art.

"Something very serious."

"Then pray come at once to the point, or my cousin will have returned from her walk before you have finished."

"My dear Mrs. Champion, I have not had the pleasure of much social intercourse with you, but I have been interested in you professionally ever since your marriage, and my position as your trustee should give me some of the privileges of friendship."

"Consider that you have every privilege that friendship can give," she exclaimed impatiently; "but pray don't beat about the bush."

"Are you seriously attached to Mr. Hillersdon?"

"Of course I am, or I should not be thinking of marrying him within a year of my husband's death. We were boy and girl sweethearts, and I would have married him without a penny if it hadn't been for my people. They insisted upon my marrying Mr. Champion, and he was very good to me, and I was very happy with him; but the old love was never forgotten, and now that I am free what can be more natural than that I should marry my first love?"

"What indeed, but for one unhappy fact."

"What is that, pray?"

"You have engaged yourself to a dying man. Surely, my dear friend, you must see that this poor young man has the stamp of death upon him."

"I know that he is out of health. He spent the winter in England, which he ought not to have done. We are going on a long cruise; we shall be in a climate that will cure him. He has been neglectful of his health, and has had no one to take care of him. It will be all different when we are married."

"My dear Mrs. Champion, don't deceive yourself," the lawyer said earnestly. "You don't pretend to have the power of working miracles, I suppose; and the raising of Lazarus was hardly a greater miracle than this young man's restoration to health would be. I tell you—for it is my duty to tell you—that he is dying. I have seen such cases before—cases of atrophy, heart and lungs both attacked, a gradual extinction of life. Doctor him as you may, nurse him as you may, this young man must die. Marry him if you like—I shall deeply regret it if you do—and be sure you will be again a widow before the year is out."

Tears were streaming down Mrs. Champion's cheeks. This matter-of-fact, hard-headed lawyer had only put into plain words the dim forebodings, the indistinct terrors which had been weighing her down since Gerard came to Florence. The change she had seen in him on his first coming had frozen her heart; and not once in all the hours they had spent together had he seemed the same man she had loved a year ago. Between them there was a shadow, indescribable, indefinable, which she now knew for the shadow of death.

Mr. Maddickson made no ill-advised attempt at consolation. He knew that in such a case there must be tears, and he let her cry, waiting deferentially for anything she might have to say.

"I had such a sad time with Mr. Champion," she said presently. "It was so painful to see his mind gradually going. You know what a long, long illness it was, nearly a year. I was a great deal with him. I wanted him to feel that he was never abandoned. It was my duty—but it was a sad trial. It left me an old woman."

This was a mere *façon de parler*, since Mrs. Champion's sufferings during her husband's illness had not written a line upon her brow or silvered a single hair.

"It was a dreadful time," she sighed, after a pause. "I don't think I could go through it again."

"It would be very hard if you were called upon to do so," said Mr. Maddickson; and Mrs. Champion felt that it would be hard.

She wanted the joys of life; not to be steeped to the lips in the apprehensions and agonies of fast-approaching death.

"Does he really seem to you so very ill?" she asked presently.

"Nobody can doubt it who looks in his face. He has some medical attendant in Florence, I suppose?"

"No. I wanted him to see Dr. Wilson, but he refused. He says that he knows all about himself, that he has nothing to learn from any doctor."

"And is he hopeful about himself?"

"Yes, fairly hopeful, I think."

"Poor fellow. I am sorry for him; but I should be sorrier for you if you were foolish enough to marry him."

Mrs. Gresham came in from her morning walk, loquacious and gushing as usual. She had been up the hill, and had taken another look at that noble David, and at the view of Florence from the terrace.

"Florence is in one of her too delicious moods," she said, "all sunlight and colour. My heart aches at the thought of going away, but the place will live in my memory for the rest of my life. I shall often be thinking of San Miniato on that hill of gardens, and the afternoon light stealing in through the transparent marble in the apse, when I am sitting in our own dear old grey church."

Gerard and his friend appeared before Rosa had left off talking, and there was an immediate adjournment to luncheon, at which meal conversation was chiefly sustained by Mr. Maddickson and Mr. Jermyn, with a running accompaniment by Rosa, who broke in at every point of the argument upon Italian art to express opinions which were as irrelevant as they were enthusiastic.

Edith Champion was silent and thoughtful all through luncheon, and more than usually observant of her lover, who looked tired and depressed, scarcely ate anything, and drank only a single glass of claret. Seeing this, she proposed a postponement of the drive to the Carthusian monastery. The afternoon was warm to sultriness, the road would be dusty, and the going up and down steps would tire Gerard. He was altogether indifferent, would go or not go as she pleased; whereupon she settled that Mr. Jermyn and Mr. Maddickson should drive with Mrs. Gresham, who was greedy of sight-seeing, and always anxious to repeat expeditions, while Gerard and his *fiancée* could spend their afternoon in the garden.

That afternoon in the garden hung somewhat heavily on the engaged lovers. They had spent a good many afternoons and evenings together since Gerard's arrival in Florence, afternoons and evenings that had been virtually *tête-à-tête*, inasmuch as Rosa was very discreet, and preferred her piano to the society of the lovers. Thus they had talked of the past and of the future—their plans, their houses, their views of society, till there was no fresh ground left to travel over. Edith could talk only of actualities. The dim labyrinth of metaphysical speculations, the dreamland of poets were worlds that were closed against her essentially earthly intellect. Gerard had never so felt the something wanting in her mind as he felt it now that he had known the companionship of Hester's more spiritual nature. With Hester he had never been at a loss for subjects of conversation, even in the monotony of their isolated lives.

The fountain, with its border of aram lilies, the pink peonies, the blood-red cups of tulips that filled a border on a lower terrace, the perfume of lilac and hawthorn, were all a weariness to him, as he sat upon the marble bench, and watched the water leaping towards the sunlight, only to fall and break in rainbow-coloured spray—symbolic of the mind of man, always aspiring, never attaining. He was in one of those listless moods when every nerve seems relaxed, every sense dulled. Moods in which a man cares for nothing, hopes for nothing, and, save for the dread of death, would willingly have done with life. Was it so vast a boon, after all, he asked himself, this life to which he clung so passionately? No boon, perhaps, but it was all. There was the rub. After this nothing. He might sicken of the loveliness around him, of the glory of colour and the endless variety of light, of the distant view of the mountains, where the snow yet lingered. These might pall, but who would willingly exchange these for darkness and dust, and the world's forgetfulness?

In the discussion on the previous evening it had been settled that the wedding was to take place on the coming Saturday. Mr. Maddickson had tried his utmost, by various suggestions, to defer the date, but Gerard had been inflexible, and had carried his point. In three days these two who sat listless and silent in the afternoon sunlight, she sheltered by a large white parasol, he baring his head to the warmth, were to be man and wife. There was nothing more for them to talk about. Their future was decided.

Gerard did not wait for the return of the party from the Certosa, or for afternoon tea. He pleaded letters that must be written for the evening post, and left before five o'clock, promising to dine at the villa as usual. Edith walked with him to the gate, and kissed him affectionately at parting, detaining him a little at the last, as if she were loth to let him leave her. And then, when his carriage wheels were out of hearing she went slowly back to the house, with streaming eyes, went straight to her room, and flung herself upon a sofa, and sobbed as if her heart would break. She was so sorry for him. She mourned him as one already dead. She mourned for her old love, which had died with the man she had loved, the light-hearted lover of five years ago. It was hard to acknowledge, it was bitter to bear, but she knew that Mr. Maddickson was right, and that to marry Gerard Hillersdon was only to take upon herself the burden of an inevitable sorrow.

"If I believed that I could make his last days happy, I would gladly marry him," she told herself. "I would think nothing of myself or of my own sorrow afterwards, my second widowhood; but I have seen enough of him now to know that I can't make him happy. He is no happier with me than he is anywhere else. He is only bored and wearied. I am nothing to him, and his wish to marry me can only be the desire to keep his promise. I believe it will be a relief to his mind if I release him from that promise. It was wrong of me to exact such a vow; very, very wrong."

She remembered that day in Hertford Street, when she had urged him to be true to her, when she had said to him of his promise—"It is an oath!" Ah, how passionately she had loved him in those days, how impossible happiness had seemed to her without him! She had thought that if he were to marry any other woman she would die. There would be no help for her, nothing left. Wealth, and all that it can buy, independence, beauty, youth, would be worthless without him. And now she was meditating with what words, with what gentle circumlocution she should free herself from a tie that had become terrible to her, the bond between the living and the dead. Mr. Maddickson's warning had suggested no new idea; the mournful conviction had been growing in her mind ever since Gerard came to Florence. She knew that he was doomed, and that the day of doom could not be far off.

Gerard wrote his letters—to his mother, telling her of the intended wedding, to his banker, to his lawyer—and then threw himself down to rest upon a sofa. He slept more than an hour, and was only awakened by some one coming into the room. It was Jermyn, who approached him with an open letter in his hand.

"Have you come straight from the Certosa, or did you stop to tea at the villa?" Gerard asked, and then seeing the altered light, "Is it time to dress for dinner?"

"I don't think you will care about dining in Florence to-night. I have some bad news for you," replied Jermyn gravely, looking down at the letter.

"Bad news—you have bad news—for me? From Helmsleigh—no, from Lowcombe?"

"Yes, it is from Lowcombe. It comes by a side wind, in a letter from Matt Muller."

"Give me the letter," cried Gerard, ghastly pale, snatching it from Jermyn's hand.

He was too agitated for the first few moments to see the portion of the letter which referred to his own evil fortune. He saw only words about the house Muller was building—abuse of architect and builder—the mistakes of one, the dilatoriness of the other. It was only when Jermyn put a hand over his shoulder and pointed to the bottom of a closely written page that he saw where the bad news began.

"You are interested I know in that pretty young woman at the Rosary, though I could never persuade you to introduce me to her. You will be sorry to hear that she is in sad trouble, poor girl, trouble which is all the sadder because the man who called himself her husband seems to have deserted her. There was a baby born at the Rosary—a baby that came upon this mortal scene before he was expected, poor little beggar. The old father's sudden death, I believe, was the cause of this premature event—and ten days or a fortnight after the baby's birth the young mother went clean off her head, and only last night she escaped from the two nurses who had care of her, and wandered away by the river, with, I believe, the intention of drowning herself. The baby was drowned, and the mother only escaped by the happy chance of a couple of Cockneys who were rowing down from Oxford, one of whom swam to the poor girl's rescue very pluckily. There is to be an inquest on the infant this afternoon, and I don't know in whose custody the mother now is, but I suppose some one is looking after her. My builder's foreman lives at Lowcombe, and he tells me there has been a great deal of excitement about the affair, for this Mr. Hanley is supposed to be a man of large means, and he is thought to have acted cruelly to this poor young woman, wife or no wife, in leaving her at such a time."

"Cruelly," muttered Gerard, "yes, with the cruelty of devils. But she would not come with me—it was her choice to stay. How could I tell? Is it true, Jermyn? Is this some trick of yours to frighten me?"

"It is no trick. I thought it best to show you the letter, that you should know the worst at once."

"The worst, yes. Hester, perhaps, a prisoner—accused of murdering her child! The worst! Oh, what a wretch I have been! When can I get away from here? How soon can I get to London?"

"You can leave Florence to-night; I will go with you. The Mont Cenis, I think, is the quickest way. I'll arrange everything with your servant. Shall you see Mrs. Champion before you go?"

"See her, no. What good would that do?"

"We were to have dined with her this evening. Shall I write an apology in your name?"

"Yes, you can do that. Tell her I am called away upon a matter of life and death; that I don't know how long it may be before I can return to Florence. You may make my apology as abject as you like. I doubt if she and I will ever meet again."

"You are agitating yourself too much, Hillersdon," remonstrated Jermyn.

"Can there be too much in the matter? Can anything be too much? Oh, how nobly that girl loved me—how generous, how uncomplaining she was! And I have murdered her! First I slew her good name, and now her child is murdered—murdered by me, not by her, and she has to bear the brand of infamy, as if she were a common felon."

"She will not be considered guilty. It will be known that she was irresponsible. People will be good to her, be sure of that."

"Will the law be good to her? The law which takes no account of circumstances, the law which settles everything by hard and fast lines. To-morrow! It will be the day after to-morrow before we are at Lowcombe, travel how we may. What ages to wait! Get me some telegraph forms. I'll telegraph to the Rector. He is a good man, and may be able to help us."

"To help *us*," he said, making himself one with Hester in her trouble, re-united to her by calamity. He forgot in his agony how false he had been to her, forgot that he had planned to spend the rest of his days far away from her. The thought of her sorrow made her newly dear to him.

He made his appeal to the Rector in the most urgent form that occurred to him. He implored that good man for Christian charity to be kind to the ill-used girl whom he knew as Mrs. Hanley. He urged him to spare no outlay in providing legal help, if legal help were needed. If she was able to understand anything she was to be assured that her husband would be with her without the loss of an hour.

He used that word husband, careless of consequences, albeit in three days he was to have become the husband of another woman.

While he wrote the telegram Jermyn looked at the time-table. The train for Turin left in an hour. The order was given to the valet, everything was to be ready, and a fly was to be at the door in three quarters of an hour.

"You'll have some dinner served here, I suppose?" suggested Jermyn.

"Do you think I can eat at such a time?"

"Well, no, perhaps not. You've been hard hit; but it would be better if you could fortify yourself for a long journey."

"Take care of yourself," answered Gerard curtly.

"Thanks. I always do that," said Jermyn. "I'll go down to the *table d'hôte* when I've written to Mrs. Champion."

He seated himself to write, but before he began a waiter brought in a letter for Mr. Hillersdon. Gerard knew the hand, the thick vellum paper with its narrow black border and massive black monogram; he knew the delicate perfume which always accompanied such letters, a faint suggestion of violets or lilies.

The letter was brief:—

"DEAR GERARD,—"I have a wretched headache, and am almost depressed and miserable this evening, so I must ask you and your friend to postpone your visit. I am not fit company for any one. I will write again to-morrow. I have much to say to you—that must be said somehow. It may be easier to write than to speak.—Ever yours.

"EDITH."

A curious letter to be written by a woman from whom he had parted only a few hours earlier. What could she have to say to him that could not have been said by the fountain when they two sat silent, as if spellbound in the languid air? He wondered at the wording of her letter, but with faintest interest in the question. Everything that affected his life at Florence had grown dim and blurred, like a faded photograph. The image of Edith Champion had receded into the background of his thoughts.

"Here is a letter that will save you the trouble of an elaborate apology," he said to Jermyn, "a letter which I can answer myself."

He scrawled a hurried line announcing his departure from Florence.

"You have deferred our wedding-day twice," he wrote. "Fate constrains me to defer it for the third time. I will write to you from London."

CHAPTER XXX.

"FROM THE WARM WILD KISS TO THE COLD."

GERARD travelled as fast as trains and boat would take him, but it was noon on the second day after he had left Florence before he arrived at the nearest station to Lowcombe, with the prospect of over an hour's drive behind an indifferent horse before he could reach the Rosary and know the worst. He was alone. He had sent his valet to Hillersdon House, and had resolutely refused Jermyn's company, although Jermyn had urged that he was hardly in a state of health to risk a solitary journey, or the consequences of further ill news.

"If there is anything worse to be told, you could not help me to bear the blow," Gerard answered gloomily. "Nor would she care to see you with me. You were no favourite of hers; and perhaps if it had not been for you I should never have left her."

They had searched all the morning papers they could obtain during the journey from Dover to Charing Cross, to discover any paragraph that might record the calamity at Lowcombe—for any report of the inquest on the infant, or the rescue of the mother. It was at least some relief to find no such record. Whatever had happened, the report had, by happy chance or kindly influence, been kept out of the papers. Hester's name and Hester's sorrows were not bandied about in a social leader, or even made the subject of a paragraph.

Gerard reached Lowcombe, therefore, in absolute ignorance of anything that might have happened since Mr. Muller's letter was written. He drove straight to the Rosary, where garden and shrubberies looked dull and dreary under a sunless sky. It seemed as if he had left summer on the other side of the Alps—as if he had come into a land where there was no summer, only a neutral season, which meant gloom and smoke in London, and dim greyness in the country.

His heart grew cold at sight of the windows. The blinds were down. The house was either uninhabited, or inhabited by Death.

He rang violently, and rang again, but had to wait nearly five minutes, an interval of torturing suspense, before a housemaid opened the door, her countenance only just composing itself after the broad grin that had rewarded the baker's last sally. The baker's cart rattled away from the back door while the housemaid stood at the front door answering her master's eager questions.

"Where is your mistress? She—she is not——"

He could not utter the word that would have given shape to his fear. Happily the girl was sympathetic, although frivolous-minded as to bakers and butcher-boys. She did not prolong his agony.

"She is not any worse, sir. She's very bad, but not worse."

"Can I see her at once—would it do her any harm to see me?" he asked, going towards the staircase.

"She's not here, sir. She's at the Rectory. Mr. Gilstone had her taken there after she was saved from drowning by those two London gentlemen. She was took to the Rose and Crown, as that was the nearest house to the river; the two gentlemen carried her there, quite unconscious, and they had hard work to bring her round. And they sent here for the two nurses, and they kep' her there, at the Rose, till next morning; and then the Rector he had her taken to the Rectory, and his sister is helping to nurse her."

"They are good souls," cried Gerard, "true Christians. What shall we do in our troubles when there are no more Christians in the world?" he thought, deeply touched by kindness from the man whose sympathy he had repulsed.

"Is your mistress dangerously ill?" he asked.

"She has been in great danger, sir; and I don't think she's out of danger yet. I was at the Rectory last night to inquire, and one of the nurses told me it was a very critical case. But she's well nursed, and well cared for, sir. You can make yourself happy about that."

"Happy! I can never know happiness again!"

"Oh, yes, but you will, sir, when Mrs. Hanley gets well. I make no doubt they'll pull her through."

"And her baby——"

"Oh the poor little thing! He was such a weakly little mite—I'm sure he's better off in heaven; if his poor mother could only think so, when she comes round and has to be told about it."

"There was an inquest, wasn't there?"

"Well, yes, sir, there was an inquest at the Rose and Crown;

but it wasn't much of an inquest," Mary Jane added, in a comforting tone. "The baker told me the coroner and the other gentlemen weren't in the room above ten minutes. 'Death by misadventure,' that was the verdict. Everybody was so sorry for the poor young lady. And it was a misadventure, for if the night-nurse hadn't left the door unfastened, and fallen asleep in her easy-chair, nothing need have gone wrong. It was all along of her carelessness. My poor young mistress got up and put on her morning gown and slippers, and took the baby out of his bassinette, and went downstairs and out of the drawing-room window, and she must have gone across the lawn down to the towing-path, and wandered and wandered for nearly two miles before she threw herself in just by the little backwater where she and you used to be so fond of sitting in the punt, where we used to send your lunch out to you."

"Yes, yes, I know. It was there, was it?"

He thought of the hours they had spent there, hours of blissful tranquillity, steeped in the summer warmth, the golden light, sweet odours of field flowers, soothing ripple of water, and rustle of willow branches. What happy hours of delight in all that is most exquisite in literature, Milton, Keats, Tennyson, Rossetti, in that music of words which is second only to the music of sweet concords and exquisite harmonies! Oh, happy hours, happy days, bliss which he had dreamed might last out all his life, and lengthen life by its reposeful sweetness. And now he had to think of his dear love, the fair Egeria of those peaceful hours, wandering distraught along that river bank, choosing by some dim instinct of the dreaming mind that spot above all other spots in which to seek death and oblivion.

"Tell me how it all happened," he said to the girl. "Mr. Davenport's death—was it very sudden?"

"Dreadfully sudden, sir. It was the shock of her father's death which made my mistress so bad. She was very down-hearted after you went abroad. We could all see that, though none of us ever see her cry. She was too much the lady to give way before servants; but we could tell by her face in the morning that she'd been awake most of the night, and that she'd been crying a good deal. And then she'd pull herself together, as you may say, and be bright and cheerful with the old gentleman, and sit with him, and talk to him, and walk beside his chair, and give all her thoughts and all her time to making him as happy as he could be made. And it wasn't easy work, for after you was gone he took a sort of restless fit, and he was always asking about you, the nurse said, and he seemed uneasy at not seeing you. And he used to talk to poor Mrs. Hanley in a disagreeable way, and he was quite nasty to her, his man told me, and was always blaming her, as if she hadn't done her best for him. He was very cruel to her, I think; but I suppose it must have been because he was worse in himself. And one day he was particularly unkind, and she left him in tears, and went out into the garden and sat there alone by the river, and didn't go to her father's room to sit with him while he took his lunch, as she generally did, and his man found her sitting in the garden very low-spirited, when he went to tell her that he and the nurse were going to dinner. Missus always used to sit with the old gentleman while those two had their dinner. And she went up to his room, and found him lying quietly on the sofa, and she sat there over an hour, for those two used to take their time over their dinner, no doubt thinking he was asleep all the time, and then, just as the nurse was going upstairs, we all heard a dreadful shriek and a fall, and we found her lying insensible on the floor near the sofa, where her father lay dead. She had gone to him, and spoken to him, and touched him, and found him dead.'

There was a pause, a silence broken only by Gerard's agonised sobbing, as he sat at the table where he had planned his new novel, in the happy morning of his love, sat with his head bent low upon his folded arms.

"She was very bad all that day and night, and Dr. Mivor telegraphed for a second nurse, for he said we was in for a bad business. She was quite light-headed, poor young lady, and it was heartbreaking to hear her asking for you, and why you didn't go to her, and talking about her father, and begging him to forgive her, as if she had any need of forgiveness, when she'd devoted herself to making him comfortable and happy from the first hour he was took. And three days after his death the poor little baby was born, and she was quite out of her mind all the time and didn't seem to care about the baby, though he was a dear pretty little thing—but very tiny and weak, and I don't think he'd have lived long, even with the best of care. A week after he was born the fever went down a bit, and she seemed to be coming more to herself. There was a great change in her, and she left off talking wildly, and she seemed to understand that her father was dead, and that you were far away; and everybody thought she was better. I suppose this made the night-nurse a little less watchful. Both nurses had been very careful of her while she was so bad with the fever, but they began to take things easier, and to drop asleep in the armchair. They'd both had a hard time of it for the first week. And I think that's about all I can tell you, sir; except that Mr. Davenport was buried in Lowcombe churchyard nearly a fortnight ago."

"Thank you for telling me so much. You are a good girl."

"Shall I get you a bit of lunch, sir? You are looking so tired and ill."

"No, thank you, Mary, I shall eat nothing till I get to the Rectory. Good day. Take care of the house, and keep everything in good order till your mistress and I come back. By the way, who has been supplying you with money since your mistress fell ill? Have you had any difficulty in providing for expenses?"

"No, sir; the cook knew where mistress kept her money, and she made bold to unlock the drawer and take out what was wanted. There was a fifty-pound note and some sovereigns in the drawer. There has been plenty to pay the nurses and gardeners, and to provide any ready money that was wanted. Cook has kept an account of everything. The undertaker has not been paid anything, nor the doctor, but they know their money's safe."

The fly was waiting, and it took Gerard to the Rectory with very little loss of time, yet to his agonised mind the distance seemed long, the horse slower than such hirelings usually are. Fate had used him almost better than he had hoped. The coroner's verdict freed Hester from all shadow of blame in the child's death—his child; that child of whose existence he had taken so little thought, deeming that he had done enough when he had left ample funds at the mother's disposal. He had cared but for one thing, to make the best and the most of his own waning days—and the thought of the child that was to be born to him had awakened no tender feeling, only an aching envy of that young fresh life in which doubtless his qualities and characteristics would live again under happier conditions, the life which would be tasting all the sweetest things that this world can give—love, ambition, pride, luxury, the mastery of men—while he was lying cold and dumb, cheated by inexorable Death out of the riches which Fortune had flung into his lap. Fate had given with one hand, and had taken away with the other. No, he had never felt as an expectant father should feel. The thought of his duty to the child had never urged him to repair the wrong he had done the mother—but now remorse weighed heavy on his heart, and he hated himself for the egotism which had governed him in all his relations with the woman he had pretended to love. He had glossed over all that was guilty in their union; he had kissed away her tears, and made light of her remorse; he had compared her to Shelley's Mary, forgetting that Shelley was as eager to legalise his union as the most conforming Christian in the land. He looked back upon the happy days of their love, and knew that when he was happiest Hester's life had been under the shadow of an ever-present regret, knew that while she was generous and devoted he had been selfish and false, soothing her conscience with shallowest sophistries.

Yes, he had used her ill, the woman who loved him; had killed her, it might be; or had killed her intellect, leaving her to go down to old age through the long joyous years, a mindless wreck; she who was once so happy, a lovely ethereal creature in whom mind and heart were paramount over clay.

The Rector received him coldly, and with a countenance which unaccustomed anger made strange and forbidding. When a benevolent man is angry his anger has a deeper root and a more chilling aspect than the ready displeasure of less kindly spirits. For Mr. Gilstone to be angry meant a complete upheaval of a nature that was made up of sympathy and compassion. But here for once was a man with whom he could not sympathise, for whom his present feeling was abhorrence.

"Is she recovering? May I see her?" asked Gerard, on the threshold of the Rector's study, chilled by that stern countenance, yet too full of the thought of Hester to delay his questioning.

"She is a shade better this morning," the Rector answered coldly, "but she is far too ill for you to see her—at any rate until the doctor thinks it safe—and when you are allowed to see her it is doubtful whether she will recognise you. She is in a world of her own, poor soul, a world of shadows."

"Is her mind quite gone?" faltered Gerard. "Does the doctor fear——"

"The doctor fears more for her life than for her mind. If we can save her life, the mind may recover its balance as strength returns. That is his opinion and mine. I have seen such cases before—and the result has generally been happy; but in those cases we had to deal with a ruder clay. All that is finest in this girl's nature will tell against her recovery. There is a heavy account against you here, Mr. Hanley."

"I know, I know," cried Gerard, with his face turned from the Rector, as he stood looking out of the window, across the flame-coloured tulips, the level lawn, towards the churchyard, conscious of nothing which his eyes looked at, only turning his face away to hide his agony.

"A heavy account; you have brought dishonour upon a woman whose every instinct makes for virtue. You have broken her heart by your desertion."

"I did not desert her——"

"Not as the world reckons desertion perhaps. You left her a house and servants and a bundle of bank-notes; but you left her just when she had the most need of sympathy—left her to face an ordeal which might mean death—left her under conditions which no man with a heart could have ignored."

"I was inconsiderate—selfish—cruel. Say the worst you can of me. Lash me with bitter words. I acknowledge my iniquity. I was only just recovered from a dangerous illness—— "

"Through which she nursed you. I have heard of her devotion."

"Through which she nursed me. I was not ungrateful—but I was wretched, borne down by the knowledge that I had only a short time to live. Ah, Rector, you in your green old age, sturdy, vigorous, with strength to enjoy the fulness of life even now when your hair is silver—you can hardly realise what a young man feels who has unexpectedly inherited a vast fortune, and who while the delight of possession is still fresh and wonderful, is told that his life is narrowed to a few precarious years—that if he is to last out even that short span he must watch himself with jealous care, husband his emotions, lest the natural joys of youth should waste the oil in the lamp. This was what I was told. Be happy, be calm, be tranquil, said my physician; in other words, be self-indulgent, care for nothing and for no one but self. And I felt that yonder house was killing me. The shadow of that old man's decaying age darkened my fading youth. If Hester would have gone with me to the South there would have been no break in our union—at least I think not—though there was another claim—— "

"She refused to leave her father?"

"Yes. She preferred him to me. It was her own free choice."

"Well, there are excuses for you, perhaps; and the result of your conduct has been so disastrous that you need no sermon from me. If you have a heart, the rest of your life must be darkened by remorse. Your child's death lies at your door."

"Does she remember that dreadful night—does she grieve for the child?" asked Gerard.

"Happily not. I have told you she is living in a world of shadows."

"Let me see her," pleaded Gerard. "You don't know how fondly she loves me—how dear we have been to each other. Her mind will awaken at the sound of my voice."

"Awaken to the memory of all that she has suffered. Would that be an advantage? Mr. Mivor must be the judge as to whether she ought to see you. If he finds no objection—— "

"When will he be here?"

"Not till the evening."

"Then I'll go to his house, and bring him here if necessary. Mr. Gilstone," said Gerard, stopping on the threshold, as the Rector followed him to the hall, "you are a good man. However hardly you may think of me, nothing will ever lessen my gratitude to you —and in the short time I may yet have to live I hope to prove that with me gratitude means something more than a word."

The Rector gave him his hand in silence, and Gerard got into the fly and was driven to Mr. Mivor's comfortable cottage, a low, white-walled building with a thatched roof, at the end of the straggling village street.

Mr. Mivor was surprised to see him, but asked no questions.

"I should have telegraphed to you more than a fortnight ago if I had known where to find you," he said. "I am glad you have come back. Mrs. Hanley is a little better to-day—only a little. We must be thankful for the least improvement, and we must try not to lose ground again."

"She has been dangerously ill, I am told?"

"Dangerously! Yes, I should think so. She has been on the brink of death, not once, but several times since the birth of her child. And since the fever took a bad turn—the night she tried to make away with herself—her condition has been all but hopeless, until yesterday, when there were signs of rallying."

"May I see her?"

"I don't think it could do her any harm. She won't know you."

"Yes, she will! She will know me. She may not recognise people who are almost strangers to her, but she will know me——"

"Poor lady! She hardly knows herself. Ask her who she is, and she will tell you a strange story. All we can hope is that with returning strength mind and memory will return. I will go to the Rectory with you, and if I find her as tranquil as she was this morning you shall see her."

They were at the Rectory ten minutes later, and this time Mr. Gilstone received Gerard with kindliness. He had given speech to his indignation, and now his natural benevolence pleaded with him for the repentant sinner. He received Gerard in his study, while the doctor went to see his patient.

"You have not asked me why I took upon myself to have Mrs. Hanley brought to this house, rather than to her own," he said.

"I had no need to ask. It was easy for me to understand your kindly motive. You would not let her re-enter a house in which she had tasted such misery—you wished to surround her with fresh objects, in a peaceful shelter where nothing would remind her of her past sufferings."

"That was one motive. The other was to place her under the care of my sister. However devoted hired nurses may be, and I have nothing to say against the woman who is now nursing Mrs. Hanley, it is well that there should be some one near who is not a hireling, who works for love, and not for wages. My sister's heart has gone out to this poor lady."

Mr. Mivor appeared at the study door, which had been left open while Gerard waited, his ear strained to catch every sound in the quiet, orderly house, where all the machinery of life went on with a calm regularity that knew no change save the changing seasons. The silence of the house oppressed Gerard as he went upstairs, filled with an aching fear. Was he to find her cold and unconscious of his presence—the girl who had hung upon him with despairing love when they parted, less than a month ago?

A door was opened, a woman in a white cap and apron looked at him gravely, and drew aside. It was the nurse who had waited upon old Nicholas Davenport, and even in this moment the association made him shudder. And then, scarcely conscious of his own movements, he was standing in a sunlit room where a young woman in a white morning gown, and with hollow cheeks and soft, fair hair, cropped close to the well-shaped head, was sitting at a table playing with the flowers that were strewn upon it.

"Hester, Hester, my darling, I have come back to you," he cried, in a heart-broken voice, and then he fell on his knees beside her chair, and tried to draw the fair face down towards his quivering lips, but she shrank away from him with a scared look.

In spite of the doctor's warning he was unprepared for this. He had hugged himself with the belief that had her mind wandered ever so far away, as far as east from west, or heaven from earth, she would know him. To him she would be unchanged. The one beloved personality would stand out clear and firm amidst the chaos of delirious dreams. Much as he had prated of molecular action, and nerve messages, and all the machinery of materialism, he had expected here to find spirit working independently of matter, and love dominant over the laws of physiology.

The violet eyes, dilated by madness, looked at him, looked him through and through, and knew him not. She shrank from him with distrust, gathered up the scattered flowers in the folds of her loose muslin gown, and moved hastily from the table.

"I'm going to plant these in the front garden, nurse," she said, "I want to get them planted before father comes from the library. It'll be a surprise for him, poor dear. He was grumbling about the dust this morning, and saying how it spoils everything, and he'll be pleased to see the garden full of tulips and hyacinths. This sort will grow without roots—they grow best without roots, don't they?"

She looked down at the flowers dubiously, as if not quite clear upon this point, and then with a sudden vehemence ran to the fireplace, where a small fire was burning behind a high brass fender, and flung the tulips and hyacinths into the fender.

"Oh, Mrs. Hanley, that's very naughty of you," cried the nurse, as if reproving a child, "to throw away the pretty flowers that the Rector brought you this morning. Why did you do that, now?"

"I don't want them. They won't grow. It's the day for my music lesson, and I haven't practised. How cross Herr Schuter will be!"

There was a little cottage piano in a recess by the fireplace—a little old piano on which Miss Gilstone had practised her scales forty years before. Hester ran to the piano, seated herself hastily, and began to play one of Chopin's nocturnes—a piece so familiar in her girlhood that even in distraction some memory of the notes remained, and she played correctly and with feeling to the end of the first movement, when suddenly, at a loss for a bar, she burst into tears and left the piano.

"It is all gone," she said. "Why can't I remember?"

In all these varying moods and rapid movements about the room there had not been one look or one gesture which indicated consciousness of Gerard's presence. Those large, luminous eyes looked at him and saw him not, or saw him only as a stranger whose image awakened no interest.

The nurse dried the patient's tears and soothed her after that burst of grief at the piano, and a few minutes later Hester was standing at the open window tranquillised and smiling, watching for some one with an air of glad expectancy.

"How late he is," she said, "and I've got such a nice little dinner for him! I'm afraid it will be spoilt by waiting. It's the day the new magazines are given out at the Free Library. He is always late on magazine day. I ought to have remembered."

She turned quickly from the window and looked about the room.

"What has become of my sewing-machine?" she asked. "Have you taken it away?" to the nurse; "Or you?" to Gerard. "Pray bring it back directly, or I shall be behindhand with my work."

Her thoughts were all in the past, the days before she had entered into the tragedy of life, while yet existence was passionless, and meant only patience and duty. How strange it seemed to find her memory dwelling upon that dull time of drudgery and care, while the season of joy and love was forgotten!

"Is she often as restless as this?" he asked, with an agonised look at the doctor, who stood by the window, calmly watchful of his patient.

"Restless, do you call her? You would know what restlessness means if you had seen her three days ago, when the delirium was at its height, and one delusion followed another at lightning pace in that poor little head, and when it was all her two nurses could do to keep her from doing herself harm. She has improved wonderfully since then, and I am a great deal more hopeful about her."

"Have you had no second opinion? Surely in such a case as this a specialist should have been consulted?"

"We have had Dr. Campbell, the famous lunacy-doctor, whose opinion of the case corresponds with my own. There is very little to be done. Watchfulness and good nursing are all that we have to look to—and Nature, the great healer. I was right, you see. I told you she would not know you, and that seeing you could do her neither good nor harm."

"Yes, you were right. I am nothing to her—no more than if I had been a century dead—no more than any of the dead who are lying under those crumbling old tombstones yonder."

He glanced towards the churchyard, where the soft spring sunlight was shining upon grey granite and golden lichen, the dark foliage of immemorial yews and the downy tufts upon the young willows. He was standing side by side with the woman who had loved him better than her life, and she took no heed of him. He tried to clasp her hand, but she moved away from him looking at him in shy surprise, and with some touch of apprehension or dislike.

"Hester," he exclaimed piteously, "don't you know me?"

"Are you another doctor?" she asked. "There have been so many doctors—so many nurses—and yet I am quite well. They have cut off my hair, and they treat me as if I were a child—but there is nothing the matter with me. I don't want any more doctors."

"You see how she is," said Mr. Mivor. "I think you had better come away at once. Your presence excites her, although she doesn't know you. Nothing can be done for her that is not being done. Miss Gilstone has been all kindness. She has given up her sitting-room and bedroom to your wife because they are the prettiest in the house."

"She is an angel of charity," said Gerard, "and Heaven knows how I can ever repay her."

"She is a Christian," said Mr. Mivor, "and she won't look to you for any reward. It is as natural for her to do good as it is for the flowers to bloom when their season comes."

Gerard followed the doctor out of the room, his looks lingering to the last upon the sweet pale face by the window, but the face gave no sign of returning memory. The doctor was right, no doubt. Messages of some kind were being carried swiftly enough along the nerve-fibres to the nerve corpuscles, but no message told of Gerard Hillersdon's existence, or of last year's love-story.

Gerard Hillersdon did not go back to London immediately after leaving the Rectory. He was fagged and faint after the long night of travel, the long morning of heart-rending emotions, the unaccustomed hurrying to and fro; but he had something to do that must be done, and with this business on his mind he had refused all offers of refreshment from the hospitable Rector, although he had eaten nothing since the hurried dinner in Paris on the previous night. He went from the Rectory at Lowcombe to the Rose and Crown, in the next village, the inn to which Hester had been carried after the rescue from the river, and at which the inquest upon her drowned baby had been held. He went to that house thinking that there he would be most likely to get the information he wanted about the man who had saved Hester's life.

Life was saved, and reason might return; but, alas, with returning reason would come the mother's cry for the child her madness had destroyed. Must she be told—or would she remember what she had done? Would she recall the circumstances of that fearful night, and know that in her attempt to end her own sorrows she had killed her innocent child?

To-day his business was to find out the name of the man who had saved her life, possibly at the hazard of his own; and he argued that the Rose and Crown was the likeliest place at which to get the information he wanted.

He was not mistaken. The inn was kept by a buxom widow, who charged abnormal prices for bedrooms in the boating season, and was said to have fattened by picking the bones of boating men. Although her bills were extortionate her heart was beneficent, and she was eager to be serviceable to Mr. Hanley, of the Rosary. She expatiated tearfully upon the loveliness of the dear young lady who had been carried unconscious and apparently dead to the Rose and Crown's best bedroom. She dilated upon the efforts that had been made to bring life back to that cold form, and upon her own pious thankfulness when those efforts proved successful.

"Indeed, sir, I thought the dear young lady was gone," she said, "and if we hadn't had a medical student in the house who hurged us to go on"—the aspirate here seemed only an element of force—"and if we hadn't had the Newmane Serciety's instructions 'anging up in the 'all, I don't suppose we should ever have had the patience or the strength of mind to have kep' at it as we did."

"Can you tell me the name of the man who rescued her?" asked Gerard, somewhat curtly, considering the landlady's beneficence a matter to be settled like her bills, by a cheque.

"Why, of course I can, sir. He and his friend was obliged to stay the night in the 'ouse, for he'd nothing but his wet boating clothes and a overcoat. He stopped that night, and his clothes was dried at my own sitting-room fire, which I kep' up all night, on purpose, and he wrote his name in the visitors' book before he left next morning. I says, 'I should like to have your name in my book, sir, for you're a brave-hearted man.' And he laughs and say, 'Lor, landlady, you don't think what I've done anythink out of the way, do you? And as for my name,' he says, 'it's a very common one, but such as it is you're welcome to it.'"

The landlady produced a fat black quarto, in which, amidst much sportive commendation of her meat and drink, and many fictitious entries of Dukes and Marquises, famous politicians, and notorious criminals, and a good deal of doggerel verse, there appeared the following modest entry—

Lawrence Brown, 49, Parchment Place, Inner Temple.

Gerard copied the address into his pocket-book, presented the mistress of the Rose and Crown with a bank note, for distribution among those servants who had been helpful on the night of the catastrophe, wished her good day, and was seated in his fly before she had time to steal a glance at the denomination of the note, or to give speech to her gratitude on discovering that it was not five, but five-and-twenty.

"This Mr. Hanley must be uncommonly rich to be so free with his money," she reflected, "but for all that I don't believe that pretty young creature is his wife. She wouldn't have took to wandering about with her baby if she had been. Perpetual fever says the doctor. Don't tell me! Perpetual fever would never make a respectable married woman forget herself to that extent."

Two hours later Gerard Hillersdon was seated face to face with Lawrence Brown, barrister of no particular circuit, and of Parchment Place, Inner Temple.

The room was shabby almost to squalidness: the man was nearer forty than thirty, with roughly modelled features, keen eyes, intelligent brow, and dark hair already touched with grey about the temples.

He received Mr. Hillersdon's thanks politely, but with obvious reserve. He made very light of what he had done—no man seeing a life at stake could have done less. He was sorry—and here his face grew pale and stern—he had not been able to save the other life, the poor little child.

"My friend and I heard a child's faint cry," he said, "and it was that which called our attention to the spot, before we heard the splash. The current runs strong at that point. The woman rose, and sank again, twice before I caught hold of her, but the child was swept away upon the current. The body was found caught among the rushes half a mile lower down the stream."

There was a silence of some moments, during which Mr. Brown refilled his briarwood pipe, automatically, and looked at the little bit of fire burning dully in a rusty iron grate.

"Mr. Brown," began Gerard abruptly, "I am a very rich man."

"I am glad to hear it," replied Brown. "There are consolations in wealth which we poor men can hardly realise."

"You have called yourself a poor man," said Gerard eagerly, "so you must not be angry with me if I presume to take that as a fact. I am rich, but my wealth is of very little use to me. I have had my death warrant. My time for spending money will soon be over, and my wealth must pass into other hands. I am here to beg your acceptance of a substantial reward for the act which has saved me from a burden that would have been unbearable—the thought that my absence from England had caused the death of the person who is dearer to me than any one else upon earth. Will you oblige me with your inkstand?"

He stretched his hand towards a shabby china ink-pot in which half a dozen much-used quills kept guard over a thimbleful of ink.

"What are you going to do, Mr. Hanley?"

"I am going to write a cheque, if you will allow me—a cheque for five thousand pounds, payable to your order."

"You are very good, but I am not a boatman, and I don't save lives for hire. I have not the faintest claim upon your purse. What I did for your—for Mrs. Hanley, I would have done for any love-sick kitchen-wench along the river. I heard a woman fall into the water, and I fetched her out. Do you suppose that I want to take money for that?"

"You would take a big fee for doing everything short of perjuring yourself in order to save the neck of a ruffianly burglar," said Gerard.

"I should do that in the way of business. It is my profession to defend burglars, and, short of perjury, to make believe that they are innocent and lamb-like."

"And you will not accept this recompense from me—a trifling recompense as compared with my income? You will not allow me to think that for once in a way my wealth has been of some service to a good man?"

"I thank you for your kind opinion of me, and for your wish to do me a kindness, but I cannot take a gift of money from you."

"Because you think badly of me?"

"I could not take a gift of money from any man who was not of my own blood, or so near and dear to me by friendship as to nullify all sense of obligation."

"But you could feel no obligation in this case, while your refusal to accept any substantial expression of my gratitude leaves me under the burden of a heavy obligation. Do you think that is generous on your part?"

"I am only certain of one thing, Mr. Hanley—I cannot accept any gift from you."

"Because you have a bad opinion of me. Come, Mr. Brown, between man and man, is not that your reason?"

"You force me to plain speech," answered the barrister. "Yes, that is one of my reasons. I could not take a favour from a man I despise, and I can have no better feeling than contempt for the man who could abandon a friendless and highly strung girl in the day of trial—leave her to break her heart, and to try to make an end of herself in her despair."

"You are very ready with your summing up of my conduct. I was absent—granted; but I had left Mrs. Hanley surrounded with all proper care——"

"You mean you had left her with a full purse and three or four servants. Do you think that means the care due from a husband to a wife who is about to become a mother? You must not be surprised if I have formed my own opinion about you, Mr. Hanley. I have been up and down the river a good many times, and have lived for a good many days here and there at riverside inns within a few miles of the Rosary, and have heard a good deal of talk about you and your lovely wife—or not wife, as the case may be. The village gossips would have it that she was not your wife."

"The village gossips were right. I was bound by an earlier claim, and I dared not marry her; but if she and I live, and if I can release myself from that other claim with honour, she shall be my wife."

"I am glad to hear that. But I doubt if your tardy reparation can ever efface the past."

The man was obviously so thoroughly in earnest that even in the face of those shabby chambers, that well-worn shooting-jacket and those much-kneed trousers, Gerard could push his offer no further. He might have been as rich as Rothschild, and this man would have accepted not so much as a single piece of gold out of his treasury. There are men of strong feelings and prejudices to whom money is not all in all; men who are content to wear shabby tweed and trousers that are bulging at the knees and frayed at the edge, and to sit beside a sparse fire in a rusty grate, and smoke coarse tobacco in an eighteen-penny pipe, so long as that inward fire of conscience burns bright and clear, and the silvering head can hold itself high in the face of mankind.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"THE LOVE THAT CAUGHT STRANGE LIGHT FROM DEATH'S OWN EYES."

GERARD HILLERSDON had no mind to occupy the cottage in which he had dreamed his brief love-dream, but he went to Lowcombe daily, and sat in the Rector's study, and heard the doctor's opinion, and the report of the nurses, and once on each day was admitted for a short time to the pretty sitting-room where Hester flitted from object to object with a feverish restlessness, or else sat statue-like by the open window gazing dreamily at churchyard or river.

The doctor and the nurses told him that there was a gradual improvement. The patient's nights were less wakeful, and she was able to take a little more nourishment. Altogether the case seemed hopeful, and even the violence of the earlier stages was said to predicate a rapid recovery.

"If she were always as you see her just now," said Mr. Mivor, glancing towards the motionless figure by the window, "I should consider her case almost hopeless—but that hyper-activity of brain which alarms you is an encouraging symptom."

The Rector was kind and sympathetic, but Gerard observed that Miss Gilstone avoided him. He was never shown into the drawing-room, but always into the Rector's study, where he felt himself shut out from social intercourse, as if he had been a leper. On his third visit he told the Rector that he was anxious to thank Miss Gilstone for her goodness to Hester; but the Rector shook his head dubiously.

"Better not think about it yet awhile," he said. "My sister is full of prejudices. She doesn't want to be thanked. She is very fond of this poor girl, and she thinks you have cruelly wronged her."

"People seem to have made up their minds about that," said Gerard. "I am not to have the benefit of the doubt."

"People have made up their minds that when a lovely and innocent girl makes the sacrifice that this poor girl has made for you, a man's conscience should constrain him to repair the wrong he has done—even though social circumstances make reparation a hard thing to do. But in this case difference of caste could have made no barrier. Your victim is a lady, and no man need desire more than that."

"There was a barrier," said Gerard. "I was bound by a promise to a woman who had been constant to me for years."

"But who had not sacrificed herself for you—as this poor girl has done. And it was because she was a clever, hard-headed woman of the world, perhaps, and had kept her name unstained, that you wanted to keep your promise to her, rather than that other promise—at least implied—which you gave to the girl who loved you."

Gerard was silent. What had he not promised in those impassioned hours when love was supreme? What pledges, what vows had he not given his fond victim, in that conflict between love and honour? She had been too generous ever to remind him of those passionate vows. He had chosen to cheat her, and she had submitted to be cheated, resigned even to his abandonment of her if his happiness were to be found elsewhere.

The London season had begun, and there were plenty of people in town who knew Gerard Hillersdon, people who would have been delighted to welcome him back to society after his prolonged disappearance from a world which he—or at any rate his breakfasts and dinners—had adorned. But Gerard was careful to let no one know of his return to London. The carriage gates of Hillersdon House were as closely shut as when the master of the house was in Italy, and Mr. Hillersdon's only visitor entered by an insignificant garden door which opened into a shabby street at the back of the premises. This visitor was Justin Jermyn, the confidant and companion whose society was in some wise a necessity to Gerard since his shattered nerves had made solitude impossible. They dined together every night, talked, smoked, and idled in a dreamy silence, and played piquet for an hour or two after midnight. The money he won at cards was the only money that Jermyn had ever taken from his millionaire friend; but he was an exceptionally fine player, Gerard a careless one, and the stakes were high, whereby his winnings made a respectable revenue.

Gerard found Jermyn waiting for him when he returned, saddened and disheartened, from Lowcombe Rectory. Jermyn was sprawling on a sofa in the winter-garden, with his head deep in a leviathan pillow, and his legs in the air.

"There is a letter for you," he said, between two lazy puffs at a large cigar, "a letter from Florence—after Ovid, no doubt. Dido to Aeneas!"

"Why didn't you open it if you were curious?" sneered Gerard. "It would be no worse form than to pry into the address and postmark."

"There was no necessity; you are sure to tell me all about it."

The letter was from Mrs. Champion, and a thick letter, that lady scorning such small economy as the lessening of postage by the use of foreign paper.

"My dear Gerard,—I think my letter of last night may have prepared you in some degree for the letter I find myself constrained to write to-day. I might have hesitated longer, perhaps, had you been still at my side, might have trifled with your fate and mine, might have allowed myself to drift into a marriage which I am now assured could result in happiness neither for you nor me. The days are past in which you and I were all in all to each other. We are good friends still, shall be good friends, I hope, as long as we live; but why should friends marry, when they are happy in unfettered friendship?

"You hurried departure makes my task easier; and should make the continuation of our friendship easier. When we meet again let us meet as friends, and forget that we have ever been more than friends. Day by day, and hour by hour, since you came to Florence it has been made clearer to my mind that we have both changed since last year. We are not to blame, Gerard, neither you nor I. The glamour has gone out of our lives somehow—we are 'the same and not the same.' I have seen coldness and despondency in you where all was once warmth and hope, and I confess that a coldness in my own heart responds to the chill that has come over yours. If we were to marry we should be miserable, and should perhaps come to hate each other before very long. If we are frank and straightforward, and true to each other at this crisis of our lives we need never be lessened in each other's esteem.

"I know that I have read your heart as truly as I have read my own; I do not, therefore, appeal to you for pardon. My release will be your release. Be as frank with me, my dear Gerard, as I have been with you, and send me a few friendly lines to assure me of kindly feeling towards your ever faithful friend,—EDITH CHAMPION."

A deathlike chill crept through Gerard's veins as he read this letter to the end. The release as a release was welcome, but the underlying meaning of the letter, the feeling which had prompted it, cut him to the quick.

"She saw death in my face that first day at Florence," he told himself. "I could not mistake her look of horrified surprise, of repulsion almost, when I stood unexpectedly before her. She was able to hide her feelings afterwards, but in that moment love perished. She saw a change in me that changed her at once and for ever. I was not the Gerard Hillersdon of whom she had thought, and for whom she had waited. The man who stood before her was a stranger marked for death; a doomed wretch clinging to the hem of her garments to keep him from the grave—an embodied misery. Can I wonder that her heart changed to the man whom Death had changed?"

He read the letter a second time, slowly and thoughtfully. Yes, he could read between the lines. He had gone to his old love as an escape from death—a flight to sunnier skies, as the swallows fly to Africa. He had thought that somehow in that association with fresh and joyous life, he would escape out of the jaws of death, renew his boyish love, and with that renewal of youthful emotions renew youth itself. He had cheated himself with this hope when he turned his face towards Florence; but the woman he had loved, that embodiment of life and happiness, would have none of him.

Well, it was better so. He was free to pick up the broken thread of that nearer, dearer, far more enthralling love—if he could. If he could! Can broken threads be united? He thought of his child—his murdered child—murdered by his abandonment of the mother. No act of his—no tardy reparation—could bring back that lost life. Even if Fate were kind, and Hester's health and reason were restored, that loss was a loss for ever, and would overshadow the mother's life to the end.

He knew that he was dying, that for Hester and him there could be no second summer of happy, unreasoning love. The meadow flowers would blossom again; the river would go rippling past lawn and willowy bank under the September sun; but his feet would not tread the ripe grasses, his voice would not break the quiet of that lonely backwater where Hester and he had dreamt their dream of a world in which there was neither past nor future, neither fear nor care, only ineffable love.

Jermyn watched him keenly as he walked up and down the open space between a bank of vivid tulips and a cluster of palms.

"Your letter seems to have troubled you," he said, at last. "Does she scold you for having run away just before your wedding? To-day was to have been the day, by-the-by."

"No, she is very kind—and very patient. She will wait till it suits me to go back."

"That will be next week, I suppose? You have done all you can do at Lowcombe. The *Jersey Lily* will suit you better than this house—delightful as it is—and Spezia or Sorrento will be a safer climate than London in May."

"I am in no hurry to go back—and I doubt if climate can make any difference to me."

"There you are wrong. The air a man breathes is of paramount importance."

"I will hear what my doctor says upon that point. In the meantime I can vegetate here."

He dined with Justin Jermyn. No one else knew that he was in London. He had not announced his return even to his sister, shrinking with a sense of pain from any meeting with that happy young matron, who was so full of the earnest realities of life, and who on their last meeting had asked such searching questions about her missing friend Hester, whether there was anything that she or her husband could do to find out the secret of her disappearance. She had reminded her brother that Jack Cumberland was the servant of Him who came to seek and to save those that were lost, and that even if Hester's footsteps had wandered from the right way, it was so much the more his duty to find her. Gerard had answered those eager questionings as best he might, or had left them unanswered; but he felt that in the present state of things he could scarcely endure to hear Hester's name, and that the mask must drop if he were called upon to talk about his victim.

Hester's attempted suicide, and the drowning of her child had not been made a local scandal, and bandied about in the newspapers. The fact was too unimportant to attract the attention of a metropolitan reporter, and Mr. Gilstone's wishes had been law to the editors of the two or three papers which usually concerned themselves with the affairs of Lowcombe and other villages within twenty miles of Reading. Gerard's domestic tragedy had therefore been unrecorded by the public Press.

The two young men went upstairs after dinner to smoke and lounge in the rooms which Gerard had copied from those unforgotten chambers in the old Inn. Here they usually sat of an evening, when they were alone; and it was here that most of those games of piquet had been played, the result of which had been to supply Justin Jermyn with a comfortable income without impoverishing the less successful player. But to-night Gerard was in no mood for piquet. His nerves were strained, and his brain was fevered. The game, which had generally a tranquillising influence, to-night only worried him. He threw his cards upon the table in a sudden fretfulness.

"It's no use," he said. "I hardly know what I am doing. I'll play no more."

He rose impatiently, and began to walk about the room, then stopped abruptly before a Japanese curtain, which hung against the panelling, and plucked it aside.

"Do you know what that is?" he asked, pointing to the sheet of drawing-paper scrawled with pen and ink lines.

"It looks as if it were meant for an outline map. Your idea of Italy, perhaps, or Africa—drawn from memory, and not particularly like."

"It is my *peau de chagrin*—the talisman that shows the shrinking of vital force—vital force meaning life itself—and thus marks the swift passage to the grave. You see the outer line of all. Tolerably firm and free, is it not? Scarcely drawn by the hand of a Hercules, yet with no mark of actual feebleness. You see the inner lines, each following each, weaker and more irresolute, the last tremulous as a signature made on a beath-bed."

He snatched a pen from the table near him, and dipped it in the ink, then made a dash at the chart, and tried to follow the outer line with a bolder sweep, but his arm was too weak to bear the strain of the upward position, and the pen ran down the paper with a single swift descending stroke, till it touched the outermost edge, then glanced off and dropped from the loosening hand.

"Do you see that?" he cried, with a burst of hysterical laughter. "The line goes down—straight as a falling star—as the life goes down to the grave."

"Come, come, my dear fellow, this is all womanish nonsense," said Jermyn, with his smooth, somnolent voice, in whose sound there was a sense of comfort, as in the falling of summer rain. "You are tired. Lie down on this delightful sofa, and let me talk you to sleep."

He laid his hand on Gerard's shoulder with a friendly movement, and drew or led him to the capacious old Italian sofa, with its covering made of priestly vestments, still rich in delicate colouring, despite the sunlight and dust of centuries. Brain weary, and weak in body, Gerard sank on that luxurious couch, as Endymion on a bed of flowers, and the soft, slow music of Jermyn's voice—talking of the yacht, and the harbours where they two were to anchor along the shores of the Mediterranean—was potent as mandragora or moly. He sank into a delicious sleep—the first restful sleep he had known since he had left Florence.

It was ten o'clock when he fell asleep, and it was past eleven when he woke suddenly, his mind filled with one absorbing thought.

"My will!" he said; "I have made no will. If I were to die suddenly—and with a weak heart who can tell when death may come—I should die intestate. That would be horrible. I have settled something—but not much; not enough"—this to himself, rather than to Jermyn, who sat quietly beside the sofa, watching him. "I must make a will."

No such thought had been in his mind before he fell asleep; no idea of any such necessity. If he had thought—as a millionaire must think—of the disposal of his money, he had told himself that were he to die intestate his father would inherit everything, and that having provided for Hester's future by a deed of trust, it mattered little whether he made a will or not. A few casual friends would be cheated of expected legacies—but that mattered little. He had no friends—not even this umbra of his, Justin Jermyn—whose disappointment mattered to him. But to-night his whole mind was absorbed in the necessity of disposing of his fortune. He was fevered with impatience to get the thing done.

"Give me a sheet of that large paper," he said, pointing to his writing-table. "I will make my will at once. You and a servant can witness it. A holograph will is as good as any, and there is no one who could attack my will."

"I hope you won't ask me to witness the document," said Jermyn, laying a quire of large Bath Post before Gerard, with inkstand and blotter, "for that would mean that you are not going to leave me so much as a curio or a mourning ring."

"True—I must leave you something. I'll leave you your own likeness—the faun yonder," said Gerard, looking up at the bust, the laughing lips in marble seeming to repeat Jermyn's broad smile.

"You must leave me something better than that. I am as poor as Job, and if I outlive you where will be my winnings at piquet? Leave me the scrapings of your money bags. Make me residuary legatee, after you have disposed of your fortune. The phrase will mean very little, though it sounds big—but there must be some scrapings."

Gerard opened an enamelled casket, a master work of the cinquecento goldsmiths, and took out a long slip of paper, the schedule of his possessions, a catalogue of stocks and shares, in his own neat penmanship. A glance along this row of figures showed him where his wealth lay, and with this slip of paper spread on the table before him he began to write.

To my father, the Reverend Edward Hillersdon, Rector of Helmsleigh, in Consols, so much, in South-Western Ordinary Stock—in Great Western—Great Eastern—Great Northern, so much, and so much, and so much, till he had disposed of the first million, Justin Jermyn standing by his side and looking down at him, with his hand on his shoulder.

He no longer wrote the small neat hand which had once penned a popular love-story, and almost made its owner a name in literature. To-night, in his fever and hurry of brain, his writing sprawled large over the page—the first page was covered with the mere preliminary statement of sound mind, etc., etc., and his father's name. Then came the list of securities, covering three other pages—then to my sister Lilian, wife of John Cumberland, vicar of St. Lawrence, Soho, and then another list of securities—then to my mother, all my furniture, pictures, plate, in my house at Knightsbridge, with the exception of the marble faun in my study—then to my beloved friend, Hester Davenport, fifty thousand pounds in Consols, and my house and grounds at Lowcombe, with all contents thereof—and, finally, to Justin Jermyn, whom I appoint residuary legatee, the marble faun. One after another, as the pages were finished in the large hurried penmanship, Justin Jermyn picked them up, and dried them at the wood fire. The nights were chilly, though May had begun, and Gerard's sofa had been drawn near the hearth.

It was on the stroke of midnight when the will was ready for signature.

"Kindly ring, Jermyn. My valet will be up, of course, and most of the other servants, perhaps, for this is a dissipated house. I hear them creeping up to bed at midnight very often when I am sitting quietly here. The servants' staircase is at this end of the house."

"Talking of staircases, you haven't left Larose so much as a curio," said Jermyn, as he pressed a bronze knob beside the mantelpiece.

"Why should I leave him anything? He has made plenty of money out of this house. Do you think I want to give him a pleasant half-hour, when I am in my grave?"

"I thought you liked him."

"I like no one, in the face of death," answered Gerard fiercely. "Do you think I can love the men whose lives are long—who are to go on living and enjoying for the greater part of a century, perhaps, to be recorded approvingly in the *Times* obituary, after drinking the wine of life for ninety years, 'We regret to announce the death of Archdeacon So-and-so, in his eighty-ninth year'? Regrets for a man of eighty-nine! And you think that I, who am doomed to die before I am thirty, can feel kindly towards the long-lived of my species! Why should one man have so much, and I so little?"

"Why should one man be an agricultural labourer with fifteen shillings a week for his highest wage, while you have two millions?"

"Money! Money is nothing! Life is the only thing that is precious. Death is the only thing that is horrible."

"True; and I doubt if the man of ninety is any more in love with death than you are at nine-and-twenty."

"Oh, but he is worn out; he must know that. The machine has done its work, and perishes of fair wear and tear. It doesn't go to pieces suddenly because of a flaw in the metal. I grant that it is a hideous thought that life should end—ever; that this Ego, so strong, so distinct, so vivid and all-absorbing, should go out with a snap into unknown darkness; but to die young, to die before wrinkles and grey hairs, to die while life is still fresh and beautiful—that is hard. I almost hate my own father when I think by how many golden years he may survive me, and revel in this wealth that was mine. They will make him a bishop, perhaps. Who knows? A rich man must always be a power in the Church. My father would make an admirable bishop. He will live as long as Martin Routh, I dare say—live on into the new century, opulent, portly, benevolent, happy—while I am nothing! Oh, think how hard these differences are! Think of Shelley's heart turned to dust under the stone in the Roman graveyard, and Shelley's friend living for sixty years after him, to lie down tired and full of years beside him who went out in water and flame, like the bright wild spirit he was."

Jermyn laid his hand upon him soothingly, yet with something of imperiousness. "Be calm," he said; "you have to sign these sheets."

The door opened, and the valet whose duty it was to answer his master's bell in the late evening came quietly into the room.

"Are there any of the servants still up?" asked Jermyn.

"Burton has not gone to bed yet, sir."

"Then ask Burton to come here with you to witness some papers. He is sober enough to remember what he does, I suppose?"

"Sober, sir? Yes, sir; I never saw Burton otherwise," replied the valet, with dignity.

"Be quick, then," said Jermyn. "Your master is waiting."

His master waited very patiently, with fixed and dreamy eyes, his hand lying loose upon the first sheet of the will, as Jermyn had placed it before him. Jermyn stood at his elbow, holding the other leaves of the will in his left hand, while his right rested lightly upon Gerard's shoulder.

The valet returned, accompanied by the butler, who looked solemn, and was careful to abstain from speech.

He stood at attention, breathing brandy, but the penmanship with which he witnessed his master's signature, as the sheets were signed one after another, was not illegible.

The valet signed with a steady hand and a bold front. He, too, had been drinking heavily, but he had a more delicate taste in liquors than his fellow-servant.

"You may as well understand the nature of this document," said Jermyn to the witnesses, "but it is not legally necessary that you should do so. It is your master's will. The only will you have made, I think, Hillersdon," he added, with his hand still lying upon Gerard's shoulder, a large hand, with abnormal length of finger, and deadly white.

"It is the only will I have made," Gerard said slowly.

"Or intend to make."

"Or intend to make," replied Gerard.

"You can go," said Jermyn to the men; "I am to sleep here to-night, by the way."

"Yes, sir. Your room is ready. I have put out your things."

Jermyn had been staying in the house since his return from Italy, but in a casual way, and he had daily talked of going to his own chambers. He had rooms somewhere in the neighbourhood of Piccadilly, but rarely imparted the secret of his address, and had never been known to entertain anybody except at a club. Gerard's single experience of his hospitality had been that after-midnight supper in the chambers eastward of Lincoln's Inn.

"You are very tired, my dear fellow," said Jermyn, when the servants were gone. "You had better lie down again."

Gerard rose out of his chair, leaving the loose sheets of Bath Post lying on the table, without so much as a look at them, and Jermyn slipped an arm through his and led him back to the sofa, where he sank down with closing eyelids, and was deep asleep a few moments later.

Jermyn took up the loose pages, folded them carefully, put them in an inner pocket of his dinner jacket, and went out of the room. The valet was waiting on the landing.

"Your master has fallen asleep on the sofa," said Jermyn. "He seems very much exhausted, and I think you had better let him stay there all night rather than disturb him. You can put a rug over him, and leave him till the morning. He is not ill, only tired. I'll look in upon him now and then in the night. I'm a very light sleeper."

The valet paused, anxious to get to bed, yet doubtful.

"Do you really think he will require nothing, sir?"

"Nothing but sleep. He is thoroughly worn out. A long night's rest will do wonders for him."

The valet submitted to a friendly authority. Mr. Jermyn wore his hair very short, had a scientific air, and was doubtless half a doctor. The valet went to look at his master, and covered him carefully with a soft Indian rug. Certainly that deep and peaceful sleep was not to be rudely broken. It was a sleep that might mean healing.

It was ten o'clock next morning before Gerard awoke. Mr. Jermyn had gone into the study several times during the night, but at ten he left the house, and it was only as the outer door closed upon him that Gerard began to stir in his sleep, and presently opened his eyes and got up, wondering to see the morning sunlight stealing through the Venetian shutters, and making golden bars upon the sombre carpet.

He looked at the clock. Ten, and broad daylight. He had slept nine hours, yet with no consciousness of more than the light and brief slumber of a man who throws himself upon his sofa for a casual nap. A sleep without dreams—a mere gap in life—that blank and idealess slumber which Socrates declared to be the equivalent of supremest earthly bliss.

"I never slept so many hours on end in my life," he said to himself, almost appalled at his abnormal slumber.

He looked about the room, slowly recalling the events of yesterday. His journey to Lowcombe, his return to town, the letter from Edith Champion.

He felt in his pocket for the letter. Yes, it was there. He read it a third time hurriedly. He wanted to be sure that he was a free man.

"Free as air," he told himself, "whistled down the wind to prey at fortune. Free to marry the woman I love—free to set right her wrongs."

To right her wrongs! Could he bring his drowned child back to life—could he heal the mother's shattered brain? Such wrongs can never be righted. The scar they leave is deadly.

He thought over the words of Edith's letter, so cold in their hard common-sense; and then he recalled his own image as he had seen it in the glass that first afternoon in the Florentine villa. That face of his, with death written upon it, was enough to scare away love. He was contemptuous and angry as he thought of that summer-time love; so exacting, so jealous, so insistent, while the sun of life and youth rode high in the cloudless heaven; so quick to faint and fail when the shadows fell.

Of the will made at midnight he had not a moment's thought. Upon that point memory was a blank. Nor did he make any inquiry about Jermyn. He dressed, breakfasted, and was on the way to Lowcombe before noon.

There was no change in the patient, but the doctor was not unhopeful. Progress must needs be slow, and it was well if there were no retrograde steps.

"Time is now the only healer we can look to," said Mr. Mivor.

There was a considerable change in the Rector after half an hour's confidential talk with Gerard; and Miss Gilstone, who hitherto had kept herself out of Mr. Hillersdon's way, received him in her drawing-room, and talked with him for more than an hour, graciously accepting his thanks for all her goodness to Hester.

"Be assured I would have done as much for the poorest girl in the parish, if her sorrows had appealed to me as Hester's did," said Miss Gilstone, "but I don't mind confessing that her beauty and her sweetness have made a profound impression upon me. Poor soul, even in her worst hours every word she spoke helped to show us the gentleness and purity of her nature. I could but think of what Ophelia's brother said of his sister,

'Thought and affliction, passion, hell itself,
She turns to favour, and to prettiness.'

Oh, Mr. Hanley, it would be an awful thought for you in after years to have led such a girl astray, and not to have made the utmost reparation in your power."

"It would have been—it is an awful thought," Gerard answered dejectedly. "My only desire now is that I may live long enough to make Hester my wife. The day she first recognises me, the day she is in her right mind, I am ready to marry her. The Rector has asked me to be his guest, so that I may know how she progresses hour by hour. Shall I be in your way, Miss Gilstone, if I venture to accept his invitation?"

"In my way? No, indeed. As if any one my brother likes to ask could ever be in my way. Why, he and I have never had two opinions about anything or anybody in our lives. We are not like the husbands and wives, who seldom seem to think alike."

"Then I may stay?"

"Of course you may. Your room is being got ready; and we can put up your servant if you like to bring him."

"You are too good; but I have no need of a servant. I shall not impose upon your kindness further than by my own presence."

He sauntered in the churchyard with the Rector during the balmy hour before sunset, and in that hour he told Mr. Gilstone his name and his history, frankly and fully, holding back nothing of folly or selfishness, greed of pleasure or greed of wealth.

"Do not think too meanly of me if I confess to having envied my rich friends their wealth, at the University and in the world. The greed of gold is the vice of the age we live in. The air is charged with bullion. All life is flavoured with the follies and extravagances of the newly rich. Everything is given and forgiven to the millionaire. For one Nero, with his Golden House, we have Neros by the score, and whole streets of golden houses. For one Lucullus we have an army of dinner-givers, at whose tables the parasite fattens. It is not possible for a young man to live in the stress and turmoil of London society and not hanker after gold as the one supreme good, and not ache with the pangs of poverty. The time came when I meant to blow my brains out, because it was better to be dead and dust than alive and poor. And on that day of despair Fortune turned her wheel, and behold! I was a double millionaire. But scarcely had I tasted the rapture of wealth before I was told that my life was not worth two years' purchase; and from that hour to this I have lived with one dark spectre always at my elbow."

"I have seen so many peaceful death-beds that I can hardly realise the fear of death," said the Rector, "any more than I can conceive the fear of sleep."

"Ah, but the everlasting sleep, that's the rub. Not the dreams that Hamlet talks about, but the dreamless blank! 'This sensible warm motion to become a kneaded clod!' To give up everything!"

"Hard indeed, if we had no hope of fairer worlds."

"A hope! A mirage, Mr. Gilstone. I can fully understand that it is your duty, as a minister of the Gospel, to hold that mirage before the dying eyes of your parishioners. But do you mean to tell me, after your long life of knowledge and of thought, that the fantastic vision of an after-world can be any comfort to you? Where is the link that can unite the dwindling dust below those grave-stones with other planets or with future time? New worlds and fairer there may be; new stars may teem with beings of grander frame and nobler minds than ours, star after star, in endless evolution, till there be worlds peopled with gods; but for me, for you, for this dust here, there is nothing more. We have no more account in those glories to come than last summer's butterflies have. We have had our day. Do you remember how Cæsar urged that Cataline and his followers should be punished in their lives, not by death, since death is only the release from suffering, and beyond death there is no place either of joy or sorrow? And you think because ninety years after Cæsar spoke those words a village carpenter, gifted beyond the average of highly gifted humanity, codified the purest system of morals ever revealed to man, and threw out random hints of a future existence, and because in after-generations tradition ascribed to this gifted man a miraculous return from death to life—you think, because Jesus talked of a day of judgment and an after-world, that the stern truths of science and fact are to weigh as nothing against those vague promises of a rustic teacher?"

"My dear friend, I will not admit that science has all the strongest arguments on her side, and that faith can only sit with folded hands and wait—

> 'The Shadow, cloak'd from head to foot,
> Who keeps the keys of all the creeds;'

but I am no dialectician, and will not attempt to argue against the barren creed which modern metaphysicians give out with as much delight as if they were bringing us new hopes instead of trying to kill the old ones. I will only say, as St. Paul said, 'If in this life only we have hope in Christ we are of all men most miserable.'"

"St. Paul was a dreamer and an enthusiast; just the right man to make a new religion; an intellectual force, great enough to change the face of Europe, and last nineteen hundred years. But I fear the axe is laid to the root of the tree, and that before the twentieth century is sped Christianity will be at best a State religion—a system of ceremonials and embroidered vestments, as it was in Pagan, as it is in Papal Rome."

The tranquil monotony of life at Lowcombe Rectory was not unpleasing to Gerard. His health was too weak for London pleasures. It suited him best to spend his days in a dreamy idleness, nursing his shrunken stock of vitality as the poor sempstress nurses her tiny fire, lest the pitiful half hundred of coal should burn too quickly. He was glad to be away from the gay world, and from the house whose splendours and luxuries had long palled upon him. Here, at least, he had rest. Even the rustic simplicity of his surroundings had a soothing influence, recalling his childish days in the old parsonage beside the mouth of the Exe. Here he was at peace, and here he was able to face the inevitable with more resignation than he had felt hitherto.

He knew that he had not long to live. He had seen Dr. South once again since his return to England, and had heard the verdict which he meant to be final. He would question science no more, since science could do so little for him, giving him at most certain rules of dietary, and a prescription which any village druggist could make up. He had to face a future which might be but a few weeks, or which, if he were careful, and Fate and climate were kind, might be spun out yet a little longer.

Here, sauntering by the river on the bright May mornings, he was able to plan that remnant of life, as it was to be spent when Hester should be restored to health and reason, and might go with him where he pleased. He would not lose an hour in making her his lawful wife, and then he would take her to Spezia as fast as boat and train could carry them, and instal her in the luxurious nest which had been prepared for another bride. And then they two would sail away together to the fairest shores of the fair inland sea, and so, death kept at bay to the utmost, should at last come upon him with gentlest aspect, and find him in his wife's fond arms, her tender hand wiping the last dews from his brow, her kisses on his darkening eyelids.

He revisited some of the old spots where he had walked with Hester in the late summer time of last year, and these rambles gave him only too just a measure of his vanishing strength. The fields over which he had trodden so lightly last September seemed now an impossible journey. He was fain to haunt the willowy bank between the churchyard and the Rosary, a distance of less than a mile. This marked the limit of his power, and he had often to rest in the Rosary garden before he could attempt the walk back to the Rectory.

The garden was in perfect order, as in the days when Hester had moved about it, "Queen rose of the roses." Everything was to be kept as it had been under her brief tenancy of the house that he had bought for her. She might wish to go back there some day, despite all that she had suffered within those walls. In any case it was her home, and he desired that it should be kept in order for her. In all this time he had ignored his own kindred. His mother and father, Lilian and her husband knew nothing of his return to England. He meant to see his sister again, were it only for half an hour, before he went back to Italy; but he did not want to see her until Hester was his wife, and he could bring sister and wife together. He wanted to secure this one faithful friend for Hester before he died.

At last, after a long month of hope and expectancy, the happy chance came. Hester's wearied brain slowly awakened from its troubled sleep, and memory and recognition of familiar faces came back one summer morning with the opening of the June roses that clustered about her window.

"Gerard," she cried, looking up at him affectionately, as he stood beside her chair, where he had so often waited for the faintest sign of returning memory. "You have come back from Italy at last! How long you have been away! How dreadfully long!"

He sat with her for an hour talking of indifferent things. Memory came back gradually. It was not till the next day that she remembered her father's death, and the doctor hoped that the night of her wandering by the river, and the loss of her baby, would be blotted out. But that was not to be. As her mind recovered its balance, the memory of all she had suffered and done in the long hours of delirium came back with agonising distinctness. She remembered the watchful care of her nurses, which had seemed to her a cruel tyranny. She remembered creeping out of the house, and through the darkness of the dewy garden, and along by the river, to that favourite spot where she and Gerard had spent so many happy hours. She remembered how she had thought that death was best for her and for her child, the one refuge from a world in which no one loved them or wanted them, she a deserted mistress, he a nameless child. She remembered the plunge in the darkness, the buoyant feeling of the water as it wrapped her round—and then no more, except the monotony of quiet days and kindly faces, sunlit rooms and sweet-scented flowers at the Rectory, a time in which she had for the most part fancied herself a child again, sinless, happy, full of childish thoughts.

They were married in the shadowy old parish church at half-past eight o'clock one June morning, Hester, pale and wan, but with a delicate loveliness which ill-health could not spoil. She was dressed in a grey tweed gown, and neat little hat, ready for a long journey. Gerard was flushed and anxious-looking, hollow-eyed and hollow-cheeked, and far more nervous than his wife.

They drove from the church to the station on their way to London, charged with many blessings from the Rector and his sister, who, with the parish clerk, had alone witnessed the ceremony.

"She is fast your wife," quoted the Rector, "the finest choral service in Westminster Abbey could not make the bond any stronger."

Gerard had telegraphed to his sister to meet him at luncheon at Hillersdon House, where he and Hester arrived between twelve and one.

He spent the hour before Lilian's arrival in showing Hester his house.

"It is yours now," he said, "yours as much as the Rosary, which I bought to be your plaything. It will be yours for many a year, I hope, when I am at rest."

She gave him a heart-rending look. Could he think that this splendour would comfort her when he was gone—or that she could ever cease to think of him and of her child—the child her madness had sacrificed? She would not pain him by one mournful word, on this day above all other days, when he had done all that he could do to give her back her good name. She went with him from room to room, praising his taste, admiring this and that, till she came to his sanctum on the upper floor.

She had scarcely crossed the threshold when she saw the faun, and gave a little cry of disgust.

"Mr. Jermyn," she said.

"Only a chance likeness—but a good one, ain't it?"

"Why do you have his likeness in your room? It is an odious face, and he is a hateful man. I cannot understand how you could ever have chosen him for your friend."

"He has never been my friend, Hester. I have no friend but Mr. Gilstone. That old man is the first person from whom I have experienced real friendliness since I became a millionaire. Jermyn has been my companion—an amusing companion—and I have never found any harm in him."

Hester looked at everything with fond interest. It was here he had lived before he knew her. It was this luxurious nest he had left for his riverside home with her. She looked at the books, and the curios on the carved oak cabinet, bronzes, ivories, jade; and finally stopped before a curtain of Japanese embroidery, which hung against the panelling.

"Is there a picture behind this curtain," she asked, "a picture which no one must look at without permission?"

"No, it is not a picture. You may look, if you like, Hester. I have no secrets from the other half of my soul."

Hester drew back the curtain, and saw a large sheet of drawing-paper, scrawled over with black lines, conspicuous among them a long downward sweep of the pen, thick and blurred.

"What a curious thing!" she cried. "What does it mean?"

"It is the chart of my life, Hester. The downward stroke means the end."

He ripped the sheet off the panel upon which it had been neatly fastened with tiny copper nails, and then tore it into fragments and flung them into the waste-paper basket.

"I am reconciled to the end, Hester," he said softly, as she clung to him, hiding her tears upon his shoulder, "now that you and I are together—will be together to the last."

He heard Lilian's step upon the stair, and in another minute she was in the room, looking at Hester in glad astonishment.

"Hester! He has found you then, and all is well," cried Lilian; "but, oh, my poor dear, how pale and wan you are looking! Has the world gone so badly with you since we met?"

"Ask her no questions, Lilian, but take her to your heart as your sister and my wife."

"Your wife—since when, Gerard?"

"That is a needless question. She is my wife—my loved and honoured wife."

Lilian looked at him wonderingly for a moment. Yes, he was in earnest, evidently, and this union of which she had never dreamed was an actuality. She turned to Hester without a word and kissed her.

"You shall be to me as a sister," she said gently, "and I will not ask you what trouble has made you so sad and pale, or why my brother has kept his marriage a secret from me until to-day."

After this they went downstairs to luncheon, a luncheon at which but little was eaten, yet which was the happiest meal Gerard had shared in for many a day. That shadow of the past which darkened Hester's life touched him but lightly. For him the future was so brief that the past mattered very little. He could not feel any poignant regret for the child whose face he had never seen; for had that child lived his part in the young fresh life would have been too brief to reckon. The son could have never known a father's love.

They left for Turin by the evening train, Lilian only parting with them at the station, where the two pale faces vanished from her view, side by side. One of those faces she had faintest hope of ever seeing again in this world.

EPILOGUE.

The London season was waning, and Justin Jermyn was beginning to talk about taking his cure—of nothing particular—in the Pyrenees, when the gossips of those favourite literary, artistic, and social clubs, the Sensorium and the Heptachord, were interested by a brief announcement in the *Times* list of deaths.

"On July 19th, on board the *Jersey Lily*, at Corfu, Gerard Hillersdon, aged 29."

"So that is the end of Hillersdon's luck," said Larose, "and one of the most live-able houses in London will come into the market. It is only a year and a half since it was finished, and we spent his money like water. I can assure you. We could hardly spend it fast enough to please him. The sensation was delicious from its novelty."

"What was his luck? Got a million or so left him for picking up an old chap's umbrella, wasn't it?"

"No; he saved the old man's life, and almost missed the fortune by *not* picking up the umbrella."

"Mr. Jermyn loses a useful friend. He was always about with Hillersdon. And who gets all the money? Or did Hillersdon contrive to run through it?"

"Not he," said a gentleman of turfy tastes. "He was a poor creature, and I don't believe he ever backed a horse from the day he left Oxford. Such a man couldn't spend a million, much less two millions. He was the sort of fellow who would economise and live upon the interest of his money. Those are not the men who make history."

"He began his career as a scribbler," said some one else. "Wrote a sentimental story, and set all the women talking about him, and then took to writing for the papers, and was in very low water when he came into his millions."

"He ought to have run a theatre," said another.

"Not he! The man didn't know how to spend money. He was distinguished in nothing."

"He gave most delightful breakfasts," said Larose.

"Yes, to half a dozen fellows who talk fine, like you and Reuben Gambier. I say he was a poor creature, upon whom good luck was wasted."

This was the final verdict of the smoking-room. The dead man had wasted golden opportunities.

It was on the same day that Mr. Crafton, of Messrs. Crafton and Cranberry, Lincoln's Inn Fields, received a visitor, who called by appointment, made by telegraph that morning. The visitor was Justin Jermyn, whom Mr. Crafton had met only once in his life at a dinner given by his client, Gerard Hillersdon.

The solicitor received Mr. Jermyn with grave cordiality, the recent death of an important client demanding an air of suppressed mournfulness.

"Sad news from Corfu," said Jermyn. "You saw the announcement in the *Times*, of course?"

"Yes; but it was not news to me. I had a telegram within two hours of the event—which was not unexpected. Our client has been slowly fading out of life ever since he left England in June. You have not been yachting with him, Mr. Jermyn?" interrogatively.

"No; I have written to him two or three times offering myself for a short cruise. It was I who bought the yacht for him, and superintended her fitting out. But his replies were brief, and"—with something of his familiar laugh, subdued to meet the circumstances—"he evidently didn't want me; but as there was a lady in the case I was not offended. Well, he is gone, poor fellow. A brilliant life, only too brief. One would rather jog on for a dull fourscore, even without his supreme advantages."

There was a pause. Mr. Crafton looked politely anticipative of he knew not what. And then, as the other sat smiling and did not speak, he himself began—

"You may naturally suppose, that, as a friend of Mr. Hillersdon's, you may have been remembered for some graceful gift, or even a money legacy," he said blandly, "but I am sorry to tell you there are no such gifts or legacies. Our lamented client died intestate."

"How do you know that—and so soon?" asked Jermyn, still smiling.

"We have the fact under his own hand, in a letter dated only three days before his death. The letter is here," taking it from a brass rack on the table. "I will read you the passage."

He cleared his throat, sighed, and read as follows—

"'My doctor, who has been hinting at wills and testaments for the last month, tells me that if I have to make my will I must make it without loss of an hour. But I am not going to make any will. My fortune will go just where I am content that it shall go, and I can trust those who will inherit to deal generously with others whom I might have named had I nerved myself to the horror of will-making. I would as soon assist in the making of my coffin. I shall leave it to my father to make a suitable acknowledgment, on my behalf, to you and Mr. Cranberry, whose disinterested care of my estate,' hum, hum, hum," murmured the lawyer, folding the letter. "I need read no further."

"No. It is a curious thing that a man should write those words who had three months before made a holograph will, and had it duly witnessed, in my presence."

"When was this?"

"On the third of May in this year."

"You surprise me. Were you one of the witnesses?"

"Certainly not."

"And how did you know of the will?"

"I was present when it was made, and it was given into my possession. I have brought it to you, Mr. Crafton, in order that you may do as much for me as you did two years ago for my lamented friend, Gerard Hillersdon."

He handed the lawyer a document which consisted of only two sheets of Bath Post, each sheet in Gerard Hillersdon's handwriting, and each sheet duly signed and attested.

The first sheet set forth the nature of the testator's possessions, a list of securities; the second sheet bequeathed these to "Justin Jermyn, of 4, Norland Court, Piccadilly, whom I appoint my residuary legatee."

"That will is good enough to stand, I think, Mr. Crafton."

"An excellent will, although he does not particularise half his property."

"No; but I think the words residuary legatee will cover everything."

"Assuredly. Was he of sound mind when he made this will."

"He was never of unsound mind within my knowledge. You had better question the witnesses, his valet and his butler, as to his mental condition on the evening of May the third."

"I will not trouble them. I am sorry for your disappointment, Mr. Jermyn, though less sorry than I might have been had you a nearer claim on our deceased client. This will is waste paper."

"The devil it is? You don't pretend there is any subsequent will?"

"Not unless one was made after the letter I have read to you. Your will is rendered invalid by our client's marriage."

"His marriage?"

"Yes. He was married on the third of June, at the Parish Church of Lowcombe, Berkshire. He kept his marriage dark, I know. There was no announcement in the papers. The lady was in poorish circumstances, I fancy, and the marriage altogether a romantic affair. She has been with him on his yacht ever since."

"With him. Yes, I knew that she was with him. But his wife! That's a fiction."

"If it is, one of the most genuine-looking marriage certificates I ever handled is a forgery. I have the certificate in my possession, sent to me by the clergyman who performed the ceremony. Mr. Hillersdon having died intestate, his fortune, real and personal—there was very little real property, by the way—will be divided between his father and his wife. Your only chance now, Mr. Jermyn, would be to try and marry the widow."

"Thanks for the advice. No, I don't think I should have much chance there. Well, I have lost friend and fortune—but I am here, and life is sweet. I am not dashed by your news, Mr. Crafton, though it is somewhat startling. Good day."

He laughed his gnomish laugh, took up his hat in one hand and waved the other to the lawyer, with the lightest gesture of adieu, and so vanished, joyous and tranquil to the last—a man without conscience and without passion.

And what of Hester, enriched beyond the dreams of womanly avarice, but widowed in the morning of her life? Can there be happiness for that lonely heart, charged with sad memories?

Yes, there is at least the happiness of a life devoted to good works, a life divided between the rural quiet of the village by the Thames and those crowded alleys and shabby slums in which John Cumberland and his young wife labour, and in which Hester is their devoted and zealous lieutenant. In every scheme for the welfare of innocent little children, in every effort for the rescue of erring women and girls, Hester is an intelligent and unwearying helper. She does not scatter her wealth blindly or weakly. She is not caught by flowery language or flatteries addressed to her feminine vanity. She brings brain as well as heart to bear upon the business of philanthropy, and in all her dealings with the poor she has the gift of insight, which is second only to her gift of sympathy.

If to help others in their sorrow is to be happy, Hester should attain happiness; but there are those who see upon the fair young face the sign and token of early death; and in those meadow paths, and by the river where she and Gerard walked in their summer dream of a deathless love it may be that those pathetic eyes of hers already see the shadow of the end.

She brought her husband from the lovely land where he died to lay him in Lowcombe churchyard, and the summer sun seldom goes down without glorifying one quiet figure, seated or kneeling in the secluded shelter of a great yew tree, by Gerard Hillersdon's grave.

THE END.

LONDON: PRINTED BY WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED,
STAMFORD STREET AND CHARING CROSS.

A WONDERFUL MEDICINE.

BEECHAM'S PILLS

ARE universally admitted to be worth a Guinea a Box for Bilious and Nervous Disorders, such as Wind and Pain in the Stomach, Sick Headache, Giddiness, Fulness and Swelling after Meals, Dizziness and Drowsiness, Cold Chills, Flushings of Heat, Loss of Appetite, Shortness of Breath, Scurvy and Blotches on the Skin, Disturbed Sleep, Frightful Dreams, and all Nervous and Trembling Sensations, &c. The first dose will give relief in twenty minutes. Every sufferer is earnestly invited to try one box of these Pills, and they will be acknowledged to be

WORTH A GUINEA A BOX.

These Pills are invaluable. No one should be without them. There is no medicine to be found to equal Beecham's Pills for removing any obstruction or irregularity of the system. If taken according to the directions given with each box they will soon restore females of all ages to sound and robust health. This has been proved by thousands who have tried them and found the benefits which are ensured by their use. For a Weak Stomach, Impaired Digestion and all Disorders of the Liver, they act like magic, and a few doses will be found to work wonders on the most important organs in the human machine. They strengthen the whole muscular system, restore the long-lost complexion, bring back the keen edge of appetite, and arouse into action with the rose-bud of health the whole physical energy of the human frame. These are FACTS testified continually by members of all classes of society, and one of the best guarantees to the Nervous and Debilitated is BEECHAM'S PILLS *have the Largest Sale of any Patent Medicine in the World.*

Prepared only, and sold Wholesale by the Proprietor,

THOMAS BEECHAM, ST. HELENS, LANCASHIRE,

In Boxes, 9½d., 1s. 1½d., and 2s. 9d. each

Sold by all Druggists and Patent Medicine Dealers everywhere.

N.B.—FULL DIRECTIONS ARE GIVEN WITH EACH BOX.